THE GALAMERE CHRONICLES

II

ONCE UPON A ROSE

GABRIELLE LANDI

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Chapter One

Beatrice

IT WAS NOT UNUSUAL for Beatrice Montgomery to be carrying a stack of books taller than she was.

It was unusual for her to drop them.

She stared at the pile of books around her feet and sighed. It hadn't been a good day, and dropping all the books didn't make her feel any better about the rest of it. She began picking them up carefully, smoothing out wrinkled pages where books had fallen open.

It was a clear sign of how flustered she was. As the first librarian in their tiny town in the Northlands, she took her job seriously, and dropping books was not part of that responsibility.

Beatrice took a deep breath as she began to stack the books on her desk. She would have to put them away later. It was almost time for her meeting with Lord Alexander Dunham, the local noble who had established the library after his mother passed. Lady Dunham had been a great reader, but, apparently, he was not, since he'd filled an entire building in town with her books.

At least he had the good sense to share the books with others, rather than keeping them locked away where no one would read them.

Lord Dunham didn't usually ask her to meet with him in winter. Her spring and fall walks to the estate were a welcome, enjoyable activity… but it was cold out, and Beatrice was not looking forward to this trip.

Beatrice grabbed her cloak and began to tie it around her neck just as the door opened.

"Hello, dear," Eugenia's cheerful voice said as she popped her head in. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"I was just leaving," Beatrice admitted, "but I can always stay an extra moment for my favorite patron."

Eugenia smiled. "And that's why you are my favorite librarian."

“I'm the only librarian,” Beatrice muttered as she undid her cloak. Eugenia never stayed a short amount of time. Lord Dunham would have to wait, and he couldn’t be upset with her because she was just doing the job that he paid her to do.

“I finished the latest one,” Eugenia said, holding out the mystery novel that Beatrice had lent her. “Have you read this one yet?”

“I haven't,” Beatrice admitted. “You are far ahead of me, Eugenia.”

“I suppose that’s what happens when you don’t have much to do,” Eugenia said with a mischievous grin.

“Yes, I suppose that would make a difference,” Beatrice admitted. It wasn’t that she was terribly overworked, but she certainly had more to do than Eugenia, who seemed to spend most of her day running around town, poking her nose in everybody's business.

Fortunately, everyone in town seemed to enjoy Eugenia, even if she was a bit meddlesome. She liked to think she’d named half the babies in town and matched multiple couples. She had even been in the library when she’d first seen Caspian and Sophia for the first time, as she regularly reminded Beatrice. Their love story had been so adventurous, it belonged in a romance novel—and Eugenia was convinced that it was all her doing.

But no one would dare to tell her that Sophia and Caspian had been a thing long before her involvement. She was a cantankerous old woman when she wanted to be, and nobody wanted to get her in a mood.

“I don’t suppose you’ve gotten anything new?” Eugenia asked, returning from browsing the shelf closest to the door, even though she’d already read all the books shelved there.

Beatrice grinned. She’d had her father pick up the next book in the series on his last run to Riyel.

The fact that he was a trader going back and forth between Riyel and the Northlands was very convenient for her.

“I might have a surprise for you,” she admitted, sitting back behind her desk.

Eugenia grinned and clapped her hands together as she bounced on her feet, her soft gray curls bouncing around her face. “You spoil me,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

“It’s my job,” Beatrice said with a grin.

Eugenia gave her a look, but Beatrice pretended that she didn’t see it.

It wasn’t her fault if she spent a little of her salary on buying the new books that Eugenia loved so much. Lord Dunham was a more than generous employer, and while the library was full of books, it had been lacking some of the newer ones that she’d had her father purchase.

She’d brought her own books—at least some of them—into the library when she became the librarian, and Eugenia had fallen in love with them. What was not to love? They were good books. She saw no harm in buying a few more of them for the library.

“So, where were you off to this morning?” Eugenia said as she signed her name to the list of people who had taken a book out.

Beatrice took the notebook back and filled out the book’s title and author. “I have a meeting with Lord Dunham today,” she said.

“Isn’t it a bit cold to be headed out to Eldenwilde?”

“Yes, it is a bit cold out,” Beatrice said with a grimace, “but I’m sure it’s something important, or he wouldn’t ask me to come out today.”

“I’m sure,” Eugenia said, nodding. “That one seems to have some sense, even if he is a hermit.”

“As opposed to the others who don’t have any sense?” Beatrice asked.

“Well, we all know Caspian has sense,” Eugenia said. “After all, he chose Sophia.”

“He did,” Beatrice said with a smile.

“And I suppose his brothers probably have some sense too.”

“I would hope so,” Beatrice said, “given that Lord Kellan will also be in charge of an estate someday soon.”

“Though not too soon,” Eugenia said, wagging her finger at Beatrice. “Wouldn’t want to wish ill upon Lord Rendon.”

“Of course not,” Beatrice said. “I would hope you know better than to think I am wishing ill upon Lord Rendon.”

“Of course,” Eugenia said. “I do think he has some sense too.”

“So, which ones don’t have any sense?” Beatrice asked with a grin.

Eugenia tsked. “I don’t know what’s going on in Duke Vaughn’s head,” she said. “Leaving his estate for so long—”

“I would assume it’s because it’s painful for him to be here,” Beatrice said, “given how he lost his daughter.”

“I know that,” Eugenia said, “but still, he’s left the Northlands for far too long, and I hope he’ll come back. His estate needs him.”

Beatrice nodded, though she didn’t particularly care if the duke didn’t come back anytime soon. If Duke Vaughn came back, she would have much less time to spend with Dietrich, since he would actually have to do his job again.

Although it would probably be good for him to have something to do with his time instead of being free to roam the whole region as he pleased.

“Anyway,” Eugenia said, picking up her book and wrapping her scarf more tightly around her neck, “I just wanted to come see if you had anything else for me. I should let you get started. It’s only going to get colder.”

Unfortunately, Eugenia was right. It was not a warm day. She had a long walk to Eldenwilde, and it wasn’t going to get any warmer. Beatrice snagged her notebook and slid it into her bag before putting the strap around her neck and reaching for her cloak.

“Oh, and be careful, dearie,” Eugenia said, as the two of them exited the library and Beatrice turned the key in the lock. “Roan is out and about today.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Beatrice said with a sigh.

Of course he was. The tavern owner was far too fixated on the fact that he thought Beatrice should marry him, and he had no qualms about making sure everyone knew it, apparently.

“Have a good day,” Beatrice said to Eugenia, who was holding the book tightly in her arms as if she would never let it go.

“I intend to,” Eugenia said with a grin. “I plan to spend the rest of the day reading.”

Beatrice laughed as she waved goodbye and turned the corner of the library, bumping straight into a person.

Her heart dropped when she realized who it was.

“Hello, Beatrice,” Roan said, his voice dropping into a tone that nearly made her wince. “Can I help you with anything?”

Beatrice shook her head and took a step back from him. Roan had been suggesting for several months now that they would make a good match, and she had no interest in becoming his wife.

Not just because she suspected that he wanted a wife who would work in the tavern with him, and she was far too busy to do so, but because marrying him was entirely unappealing.

“I'm just off to the café,” she said as she took another step back.

“You know, you're always welcome at the tavern,” he said.

“I know, thank you,” Beatrice said before scurrying off. “Have a good day,” she called over her shoulder as she made her way across the street.

Fortunately, she didn’t have to lie about her plans this time to spend less time in his company.

She hurried into the Cozy Cat Café and was immediately greeted by Thea smiling on the other side of the bar. The air was warm and smelled of spices and baked goods, and Beatrice relaxed instantly upon entering. There was something about being here that could make any day better, even one in which she dropped books and bumped—literally—into Roan.

“Good morning!” her friend called as Beatrice made her way to the counter. “What can I get for you?”

“I have to go out to Eldenwilde,” Beatrice said with a grimace. “So, something very hot.”

Thea frowned. “In this weather? Why is he having you go out now? That's unusual.”

Beatrice shrugged and dropped a few coins on the counter. “I'm not sure, but he sent a messenger this morning and asked me to come over at my earliest convenience, so I assumed I shouldn't make him wait too long.”

Thea nodded, already busy preparing a drink for her, and Beatrice wandered over to the fireplace to thoroughly warm herself before she went back out into the cold.

There was a gentle meow, and Beatrice looked over to see the resident café cat, Ginger, looking up at her.

“I'm sorry,” she said to the cat. “How could I forget you?”

The orange cat let out a grumble, clearly asking the same question as Beatrice hurried to rectify her wrong and pet the demanding feline.

“I don't suppose you and your long fur want to go to see Lord Dunham instead of me?” she asked Ginger, who didn't answer, because she was a cat.

“I didn’t think so,” Beatrice said with a grin.

A moment later, Thea came over with a mug of hot tea and handed it to Beatrice. “Stay warm and let me know when you're back safely. I'm surprised he didn't send a carriage for you with how cold it is. I didn’t think he was as cold and uncaring as the rumors would lead me to believe.”

Beatrice shrugged. “He’s not, and he knows I like to walk.”

“And yet, you aren’t usually walking all the way there in the snow,” Thea pointed out.

Beatrice shook her head. “I’d rather walk than ask for a carriage. I just needed something hot to warm myself before I leave.”

Thea frowned but didn’t say anything else as she bustled away to wait on another customer. Beatrice smiled at her friend’s retreating back. It was sweet of Thea to worry, but all would be well. It was a cold day, but it wasn’t currently snowing, and she would rather get it over with than wonder what Lord Dunham was so urgently asking to see her for. Because Thea was right—it was unusual for him to ask to see her outside of their usual times.

She sat in a cozy chair by the fire and enjoyed the ambience of the café while drinking her tea, Ginger purring at her feet. Taking a moment to breathe always helped—and so did visiting the café and spending time with Ginger. After finishing her drink, she brought her empty mug back to the counter, and with a cheerful wave at Thea, set off into the snow.

Whatever had Lord Dunham in such a rush to speak with her, she was ready to hear it.

Chapter Two

Alexander

LORD ALEXANDER DUNHAM OF Eldenwilde paced his study as he waited for the librarian to arrive.

It was not unusual for him to see the librarian, but it was unusual for him to be this nervous.

His palms were sweating, and he had a hard time drawing enough air into his lungs. As he continued to pace, one foot in front of the other, back and forth across his study, his mind raced.

If she didn’t agree to his plan, he wasn’t sure what would happen.

He glanced out the window, hoping to see her arriving, but there was still no one in sight.

His message had requested that she come as soon as she could, and she usually came very promptly. But he’d never had something so important to tell her before, and he’d never been waiting for her to arrive like this.

Rose stared at him and yowled in disapproval.

“I know,” he told her, glaring at her. “I know you don't like it, but I don't know what else to do.”

Rose ignored him, turning away.

Alexander sighed. “It's not as if I can see any other way out of it,” he said. “Believe me, I have thought through so many scenarios, I don't even know how to tell you how many there have been. But the fact remains that if I am not married, I am vulnerable.”

Maybe even if he was married, but he didn’t want to think about that.

“You know Lohndrey is coming back,” he said, his voice beginning to sound a little desperate, even to himself. “And if I don't have a wife, he's going to force me to marry his daughter.”

Rose looked unimpressed.

“I just can't. Not to mention the fact that it would then give him access to my estate, with his daughter as its mistress, and I can't be responsible for allowing a sorcerer access to an estate like that. My people deserve

better from me. There is too much at stake for me to stand idly by—not when time is running out.”

If his father was to be believed, the sorcerer would be coming back with his daughter on the eve of his thirtieth birthday.

If only he could talk to Jenkins about it…but he hadn't been able to tell a soul.

Every time he tried, his voice would stop working. Over the years, he had tried to slip references to the curse into his daily conversation, but no matter what he said, it never seemed to click—not that he expected it to.

Since magic had been outlawed years ago, no one he spoke to on a daily basis had any reason to suspect that he was under a magical curse. It simply wasn't something that would be in the normal realm of possibilities.

But, as he had learned on that day so many years ago, magic was real. And even though it was outlawed, there were still people practicing it, like the sorcerer who’d had a need for vengeance against his family.

So now he needed a wife, and fast. Because if there was one thing he knew, it was that he could not marry the murderer’s daughter.

He stopped pacing and collapsed into the chair by the fire. Rose, sensing that he had stilled for a moment, followed him, jumped up onto his lap, curled up there, and began to purr. He methodically stroked her back and took a deep breath.

Getting married before his thirtieth birthday wasn’t something he’d planned on doing, but it didn’t seem out of the realm of the ordinary. And while marrying someone just for the sake of being married wasn’t his favorite plan, it seemed like the best option to protect both him and his people.

He could only hope that the sorcerer wouldn’t take it out on them—or his wife.

Hopefully, Beatrice would say yes, because of all the girls he knew in the region, she was the only one he could imagine marrying. None of the nobility were eligible—Lord Taylor's daughters and Lady Liliana Rendon were far too young for him. He could have gone to Riyel to find a bride, but he didn’t want to risk Lohndrey arriving when he wasn’t home.

A local bride was necessary, and Beatrice Montgomery fit everything he needed.

She was surprisingly well-educated, and she wasn't vapid like many of the ladies he'd met in Riyel. She was less afraid of him than the rest of the commoners, and at least they could discuss books if they had nothing else in common.

It didn't hurt that she was beautiful, too.

But that was entirely inconsequential. She was the most suitable option, and if she turned him down, he would be stuck.

All he could do was hope that he would be persuasive enough to convince her that marrying him was a better option than staying a librarian.

He shot to his feet at the sound of footsteps in the hallway, displacing the cat, who let him know she was displeased by digging her claws into his shin.

But he didn't pay attention to Rose.

Was she here already?

But when the door opened, it was simply Jenkins, who opened the door and frowned at him. "You're going to ruin the floor with your pacing, my lord," he said. "Why don't you sit?"

Alexander shook his head, shaking the cat off and beginning to pace yet again. "How can I sit?" he asked. "You know what I'm about to ask her."

"You know I don't approve," Jenkins said, a sour look crossing his face.

"I know," Alexander said.

Jenkins had been there for the aftermath of the sorcerer's first visit. He'd been there helping to extinguish the fire and had been there when his father and mother succumbed to their wounds.

But he didn't know everything.

Jenkins hadn't been there when Alexander's father had told him, his voice cracking, that the sorcerer had forcibly bound him to a betrothal agreement before disappearing in the flash of fire and smoke that set their rose garden ablaze and mortally wounded his parents. He hadn't been there to overhear that Alexander and his parents were cursed to silence about the whole matter.

He hadn't been alone, wrestling with the fact that he was betrothed to a murderer's daughter, for the past fourteen years.

The investigation into the fire hadn't turned up any trace of the sorcerer, and if it weren't for the fact that his voice wouldn't work any time he tried to discuss it, he could almost pretend he'd imagined the whole thing.

“What will you do if she says no?” Jenkins asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I will do everything in my power to make sure that she doesn’t,” Alexander said.

From the corner, Rose muttered a yowl, and he turned to her and shook his head.

“That’s enough from you,” he said. “He’s already upset with me. I don’t need you being cranky with me, too.”

The orange cat let out another disapproving sound and turned her back to him.

“She’s an odd one,” Jenkins said, frowning at the cat. “It’s almost like she can understand you.”

“Yes, it is,” Alexander said, sighing at Rose’s antics. She could understand him, even if she didn’t like to let it on. But he needed to return to the matter at hand. “Regardless, it was my father’s will that I be married by thirty, and I must fulfill his wishes.”

He’d conveniently left out the fact that it wasn’t legally in his father’s will. His butler didn’t know better, and his lawyer had gone back to Riyel, so there was no one to contest his statement.

Jenkins frowned, but didn’t say anything else.

“I know it’s sudden, but I’m hopeful that we will have a good marriage,” Alexander said.

Hopefully it would be both good and long. He didn’t want to think of the alternative.

There was a rap at the door, and Jenkins took a deep breath. “She’s here,” the butler said, turning on his heel. “I’ll bring her in. Good luck to you.”

Jenkins disappeared and Alexander stood behind his desk, planting his hands into the firm wooden surface that had survived so many Lord Dunhams before him and would hopefully survive many more. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for the conversation ahead.

He could only hope that Beatrice would say yes, and once she had, that she would understand the importance of protecting his family's estate and the people who relied on him.

Barely a moment later, there was a rap at the door, and Jenkins opened it and announced Miss Beatrice Montgomery.

And there she was.

The librarian’s reddish-brown hair had escaped from its usual braid, and her cheeks and nose were a bright shade of red as she walked stiffly toward him, her arms tucked in the folds of her cloak. The cloak looked damp, and not the kind of damp that would appear in the space between a carriage and the front door.

Had she walked through the snow?

“Did I not send a carriage?” he asked, hurrying toward her and guiding her toward the blazing fireplace. “I’m so sorry, Miss Beatrice. I don’t know what I was thinking—or not thinking.”

“All is well,” Beatrice said, but her teeth chattered as she spoke, and she willingly went with him to the fireplace. “I enjoyed the walk. It was only the last few minutes where the cold got to me. You know I enjoy the exercise.”

“That doesn’t mean you should walk when there are six inches of snow on the ground,” he said, ushering her into his favorite chair. Shame filled him as he looked down at her shoes, which were soaked through. “May I take your wet shoes off?” he asked.

“I can do it,” Beatrice said, as Jenkins appeared with hot tea and a blanket.

“No, you hold the tea,” Alexander said firmly, looking at her red hands. “Would you rather have me send for a maid?”

“You needn’t trouble yourself,” Beatrice said as she began shivering.

Alexander nodded to Jenkins as he handed her the mug of hot tea, her fingers having difficulty curling around it, and laid the blanket over her lap. The butler understood his gesture and hurried out of the room to fetch a maid.

How could he have forgotten to send a carriage? He was about to ask her one of the strangest questions she had probably ever heard, and he couldn’t even be bothered to send a carriage to get her here safely.

“I apologize for not sending a carriage,” Alexander said.

“It is quite all right,” Beatrice said softly. “Please do not trouble yourself any further on my behalf.”

She smiled at him, and though he still felt riddled with guilt, Alexander almost smiled back. Something about her had a way of always lifting his spirits.

It was hard to be upset with anything when Beatrice Montgomery smiled at you like that.

“May I please take your shoes off so your feet can warm up?” he asked. He didn’t want to wait for a maid when she was still so cold.

“If you wish,” Beatrice said, glancing away from him toward the fire.

Alexander began unlacing her shoes, doing so carefully, not wanting to hurt her. His hands were large enough to wrap around her ankles, and the wet knots were more difficult to untie than he had expected. He had never been this close to her before, and looking up at her brown eyes, which sparkled despite how cold she was, made him feel discombobulated, his heart beginning to race.

He pulled off one shoe and then the other, just as a maid came bustling in. He quickly stood and distanced himself, gesturing to Beatrice’s feet, allowing the maid to do the more intimate job of taking off her soaked-through wool socks.

Once the maid had gone and Beatrice was sipping her tea, Alexander cleared his throat.

She looked up at him, her brown eyes questioning, but the words stuck in his throat. Not because of the curse, but because he could hardly believe he was about to say them.

There was no choice, though. He had to protect his people, and this was the only way he could think of to do so.

He didn’t want to look at her, but he owed her the courtesy of looking into her eyes when he asked the question. This was one of the biggest moments of his life, and perhaps hers as well.

Alexander cleared his throat one more time and blurted out, “Miss Beatrice, will you marry me?”

Chapter Three

Beatrice

OF ALL THE THINGS Beatrice had considered on her long, cold walk to Eldenwilde, she had never considered the fact that Lord Dunham would want to marry her. It hadn't even crossed her mind. And if she had to guess again, she still wouldn't imagine something of this nature.

If it wouldn't be super obvious, she would pinch herself to make sure that she was, in fact, awake and not merely dreaming all of this.

“Miss Beatrice? Did you hear me?”

Beatrice shook herself slightly. She must not be dreaming, and she would have to answer.

“I am...not sure,” she admitted. How could she be sure when she had never expected to get married in the first place, much less to Lord Dunham?

“I know this must be a shock,” he said, “but I must find a wife immediately.”

She could hardly believe the words coming from his mouth.

It was so unbelievable, one could consider it to be a joke.

Her eyes widened. Was it a joke? “This isn't a prank, is it?” she asked, just to confirm. “Dietrich isn't about to pop out and laugh at me?”

Lord Dunham shook his head. “I don't know who Dietrich is, but no, it's not a prank.”

“I didn't think it was,” she said with a sigh, leaning back in her chair. It was extraordinarily comfortable, and the warmth of the fire was beginning to help her thaw out. If she had been alone, she would have been tempted to take a nap.

But one couldn’t take a nap when a man was proposing marriage, which was apparently her current situation.

“Why must you find a wife immediately?” she asked.

Lord Dunham took a deep breath and opened his mouth, then paused. “It was my father’s will that I marry before my thirtieth birthday,” he said

after a moment.

Beatrice considered his statement. She'd heard before of nobility having legal requirements to fulfill before they could inherit their estate, but wasn't Lord Dunham already Lord of Eldenwilde?

"Is there no one else for you to marry?" she asked.

He shook his head. "The young ladies of the nobility in this region are far too young for me, and it's very unlikely that I could travel to Riyel to find a bride in time. The simple truth is, I need you, Miss Beatrice," he said.

She felt butterflies in her stomach at the words. She could hardly imagine Roan or her father admitting to needing someone in that way. Dietrich might, perhaps, but he was more boy than man when it came to her.

No one had ever needed her before.

"When would you need to know the answer?" Beatrice asked.

Lord Dunham grimaced. "About thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes?" Beatrice said, almost to herself, her head suddenly feeling light.

She had thirty minutes to decide if she would marry him and become Lady Beatrice Dunham of Eldenwilde.

A thought pushed to the forefront of her mind. "What about my library?" she demanded.

He glanced away from her, toward the fire. "As my wife, you would not be able to run the library in town. But I have a library here on the estate, which contains even more books than the library in town, and you would be given free rein to manage both as you see fit as the lady of the estate, of course."

The thought of giving up her library was like a knife to her chest. "I would have to give up my library?"

"Yes," he said, turning back to her, and there was true regret in his eyes. "And I apologize for prodding, but unfortunately, my time runs short. If you will not marry me, I'll be leaving in half an hour for Riyel to search for a maiden to marry."

"I see," she murmured.

Lord Dunham took a deep breath. "You would be given the full power of the title of Lady Dunham as long as you live. You'd never want for anything, and I would be as much or as little of a husband as you wish."

Her eyes widened at the implication. “And an heir?”

“We can discuss that in a year or so,” he said, not quite meeting her gaze. “It’s certainly not something we’d be rushing toward.”

Beatrice took a deep breath. She could hardly believe she was actually considering the idea. Surely, this was something that she should run far, far away from.

Yet, the truth was, the idea of stability that would last the rest of her life was very appealing. She’d grown up with so little stability that the idea of marrying a man who was tied down to an estate and wouldn’t leave it felt like a dream come true.

It wasn’t as if she had many men beating down her door in town. Roan had been the only one to even hint at marriage, and she had no interest in him. There were few men who were interested in a woman more educated than they were.

That wouldn’t be an issue with Lord Dunham.

And she would be mistress of her own home…not simply managing her father’s and being at the mercy of his every whim.

When she thought about it like that, the decision suddenly became much clearer. Even if she might regret it, even if no one else understood why she had done it.

Her one regret would be leaving her library. But Lord Dunham had promised a large library of books here at Eldenwilde, and she would ensure that her library was well looked after.

Perhaps Eugenia would be interested in the position. She spent a large amount of time at the library already, and she had no qualms about telling people what they needed. She would probably love the chance to help Beatrice with running the library.

It would change everything about her life, but Beatrice had never been one to shy away from a challenge.

Maybe it was time to try something new.

Marrying a lord seemed new enough.

With her mind made up, Beatrice looked at Lord Dunham and nodded her head.

“I will marry you,” she said.

The sigh of relief that he gave made her smile.

“Let us make haste then,” he said. “I will have a maid take you to your room so you can prepare while I send for the priest.”

Beatrice took a deep breath. He was wasting no time. She already had a room?

Lord Dunham took a deep breath. “Thank you, Lady Beatrice.”

Her eyes widened at the new title. Lady Beatrice.

She was about to become nobility.

“Of course, Lord Dunham,” she said as she stood, her bare feet connecting with the cool floor. “I owe my current situation to you, and it has treated me well thus far. I am sure that trusting my future to you will also work well.”

He let out a slight chuckle. “I hope it will work well for you, too. And please, call me Alexander.”

Beatrice glanced down at the floor, her cheeks heating at the thought.

Marrying Lord Dunham was one thing.

Calling him Alexander? Another thing entirely.

The maid from earlier appeared and led her out of Lord Dunham's study, toward the grand staircase she had always seen, but never climbed.

“I’m Beatrice,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Colette, ma’am.”

“Have you worked for Lord Dunham long?” Beatrice asked as she followed Colette up the stairs.

Each step took her further and further into her new life. Within the hour, she would be married. This would be her new home, and she would be Lady Dunham.

“Most of my life,” the maid said. “My family has been at Eldenwilde for years.”

Beatrice should have paid more attention, but she was distracted as she climbed. The grand staircase she had always seen and wondered what lay upstairs would become a staircase that she descended regularly.

How was this her life? This seemed stranger than the romance novels that she occasionally read.

Well, perhaps more than occasionally.

But since she’d had no expectation of getting married, it had seemed a way to enjoy the romantic stories that she never expected would happen to her.

Well, now she was getting married…but there was no romance involved here, either. So she had been both right and wrong.

The maid led her up the stairs and turned left toward a large door.

“The housekeeper will be right with you, ma'am,” Colette said, bobbing a slight curtsy before hurrying down the hallway and disappearing down what must be the servants’ staircase.

Beatrice pondered the doors in front of her. Should she go in? Should she wait for the housekeeper? Colette hadn't given any instructions, and it felt odd to open a door in someone else's home.

But then again, this was to be her home.

What would Sophia do?

Beatrice grinned at the thought. Her friend Sophia had also become nobility after being raised as a commoner. Perhaps she should visit her soon and ask her advice.

Even if she couldn’t visit Sophia, she’d need to send word, and soon, because Thea would be very concerned if she didn't go to the café tomorrow. She wouldn’t want Thea and Dietrich to be worried on her behalf or to assume that Lord Dunham was a beast who had held her captive.

He’d simply asked her to marry him instead.

The townsfolk believed he was cold and uncaring, but that was just because they didn’t know him like she did. Any man who would establish a library and pay her to spend her life in a room full of books couldn’t be a beast.

No, he might be surprising, but he wasn’t cold and uncaring because he didn’t go into town.

Perhaps, as his wife, she could help him to change his image in town. She could start by going to town tomorrow to tell Thea and Dietrich that she was married to Lord Dunham.

She grinned at the thought as she leaned forward and threw the door open, gasping at the sight before her. The room was large enough that even the enormous bed with a canopy and four posts that towered high above it couldn’t fill it.

This was to be her room.

The room was fit for a queen, or at least a lady…which she was shortly to become.

She spun around, taking in the large, airy room, and her mouth dropped open when she realized that the room also contained three large bookcases filled with an assortment of books.

She hurried over, greedily taking in all the books that were about to become hers when she became mistress of the estate. She would have been lying if she said this marriage thing didn’t seem worth it for the books alone.

She was still taking in the soft, velvety exterior of one particularly gorgeous leather tome when there was a rap at the still-open door and a middle-aged woman wearing a gray dress and with streaks of silver in her hair bustled in.

“Hello, dear,” the woman said, her eyes bright and warm and her voice cheery. “I'm Mrs. Jenkins, the housekeeper, and I am here to help you prepare for your wedding.”

The words, stated so matter-of-factly, made Beatrice giggle.

“Is everything all right?” the housekeeper asked with a smile.

“Only, when I left my house this morning, I didn't expect to be getting married, much less to Lord Dunham,” Beatrice explained.

“I can only imagine, dearie,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “When I married my husband, I was fully in love with him, and even then, I was nervous. I'm sure you must be even more so.”

“Will you tell me about the man I am marrying?” Beatrice asked as the housekeeper hurried over to the wardrobe and opened it to reveal that it was overflowing with dresses. Beatrice's eyes widened yet again. If this house and these people didn't stop surprising her, she might permanently appear to be an owl.

Where had all these dresses come from?

“Lord Alexander is a kind and just man who has had a hard life,” the housekeeper said, clicking her tongue. “I am very glad that he has found a wife who will accept him as he is and help him with this next phase of his journey.”

The housekeeper's shrewd eyes looked her over. “You're about the same size as his mother—God rest her soul—so fortunately, we should be able to find something in here for you to wear for the ceremony. You'll not want to wear your wet things. What he was thinking, not sending a carriage for you...” she said, clicking her tongue again. “And my Jenkins didn't remind him! I'll have a word with him later.”

Beatrice startled at the realization that Mrs. Jenkins must be married to the butler, Jenkins.

She allowed Mrs. Jenkins to help her dress quickly in a stunning blue gown that laced up in the back and showed off her figure. “This color reminds me of the dress you were wearing,” the housekeeper said as she finished lacing it, “so I thought it might help you as you go from the old to the new.”

“Thank you,” Beatrice said, smiling at the woman in the mirror as she pulled out a pair of slippers and set them on the floor. Beatrice slipped her feet into them, her feet instantly warming.

The housekeeper pulled a brush out of the drawer and undid the braid that was falling apart. “I am not talented when it comes to dressing hair, but I can brush it out and it will look beautiful.”

Beatrice stood patiently and waited as the housekeeper finished, tying part of her hair back with a blue ribbon that matched the gown.

“Are you ready to become Lady Dunham?” the housekeeper asked gently as Beatrice inspected herself in the mirror.

She looked like a lady.

Whether she was ready or not, she was on her way to becoming the new Lady Dunham, and her life would never be the same.

Chapter Four

Alexander

BEATRICE ENTERED HIS STUDY wearing a dress in a stunning shade of blue that had once belonged to his mother, and all the air left Alexander's lungs in one fell swoop. If he hadn't been expecting her, he might have thought it was an angel walking into the room.

But instead, it was his bride.

He considered himself very fortunate to have found a bride who was as sweet, kind, and beautiful as Beatrice Montgomery. Or, as she was soon to be, Beatrice Dunham.

He had been anxiously pacing his study yet again as he waited for her to reappear, but she met his gaze with a look that somehow steadied him. It promised she would be with him through this, no matter what, and made him less afraid of the future.

After all, if she was willing to marry him without knowing all the reasons for his urgent marriage, surely she would understand about his curse when she found out.

She drew nearer, a smile beginning to reach the corners of her eyes as she approached and looked him over. He had changed, too. He'd argued that it wasn't a formal wedding, and Jenkins had argued that was all the more reason for him to wear his finest clothes. Seeing Beatrice wearing his mother's gown, Alexander was glad that he had allowed his butler to send him upstairs to change.

"You look very handsome," Beatrice said with a smile as she approached. Her cheeks flushed as she said the words, as if she wasn't quite sure if she should be so familiar with him.

"So do you," Alexander admitted before realizing what he'd said. "Beautiful, I mean. You look beautiful."

He wasn't sure how to be so familiar with her, either. But her smile at his words was big enough to light the whole room.

"Thank you," she said. "Are you ready for this?"

“Are you?” he asked, searching her face for signs that she wasn't—that she knew what she was getting herself into, that she wasn’t going to back out of the room and run screaming to town, declaring that he was a madman who had tried to trap her into marriage. But she stood firm, a smile on her face, as there always was.

Somehow, his lack of smiles hadn’t run her off yet.

“I am ready,” she said.

Alexander offered his arm, holding his breath until she took it.

They were doing this. It was actually happening.

He was about to marry the librarian in the hopes of preventing an evil sorcerer from taking over his estate.

“Thank you,” he said softly as he began to walk her toward the door.

“Of course, my lord,” she said. “Though you should know, I'm only doing it for the books.”

He looked down at her in surprise, and she gave him a wink.

Oh, she had been teasing him. He wasn’t used to people teasing him, but perhaps he would have to get used to it.

He’d seen hints of this side of Beatrice, but marrying her would certainly allow more of her playful side to come out than the brief visits from before, when she was merely his employee.

“Well then, I suppose it's a good thing we have the priest waiting for us in the library,” he said.

She froze, her breath catching as she looked up at him with starry eyes.

“The library?” she asked, a smile on her lips.

“The library,” he confirmed. “If I must marry you in haste, with no one to see you off, I thought maybe you would enjoy the comfort of having books by your side.”

Her eyes began to mist over.

“That is one of the most thoughtful things anyone has ever done for me,” she said softly. “Thank you, my lord.”

“It's Alexander now,” he reminded her.

Beatrice colored slightly.

“I will try, but it may take me some time to remember to address you so informally,” she said.

“Even though we are about to be married?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Even though we are to be married,” she admitted. “You have been my employer for two years now; that is not something I can forget so quickly.”

“I hope you will forget it soon enough,” Alexander said as they turned the corner and entered the library.

He turned to watch her face, and he had been right to do so, because the emotions that played out there were beautiful to see. Her eyes opened wide in shock and then in wonder as she took in the room with bookshelves along every wall. A sliding ladder adorned the half full bookcases on the western side, and to the north, a wall of windows along the breadth of the room allowed light to flow in and illuminate the whole room in a warm glow. The orange kitten had even joined them, lying stretched out in one particular patch of sunlight, reminding her of Ginger at the café.

“I have never seen so many books in my whole life,” Beatrice breathed in awe.

“And these are the ones that are left after we filled your library,” Alexander reminded her, and she laughed.

“I cannot believe it. Did your mother read all of these?”

“Goodness, no,” Alexander said with a chuckle, “but she loved to collect them. She had more than one bookseller in Riyel who would send her regular packages, and every time my father came back from the city, he would bring even more. Nothing made her happier than when he presented her with a package full of books.”

Beatrice let out a sigh. “I can imagine,” she said, letting go of his arm to twirl around and take in the full sight of his mother's collection. “There must be hundreds of books in here still.”

“Probably,” Alexander admitted. “It wouldn't surprise me if she collected more than a hundred every year.”

Beatrice closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “It even smells like books,” she said, contentment filling her voice. “Oh, I could die happy in this room.”

The priest came out of the chair in the corner where he’d been sitting, and Alexander reached for Beatrice’s arm again.

She startled when she saw the priest, apparently so enraptured by the books that she hadn’t noticed him.

“Hello,” she said, smiling warmly at him.

“Hello, Beatrice,” the priest said.

“He will be happy to tell your father you’ll be staying with me when he goes back to the village,” Alexander told Beatrice. “I wouldn’t want him to worry for you.”

Beatrice nodded. “I would appreciate that, although it’s not my father you need to notify—it’s Thea, at the café.”

The priest nodded, but Alexander was confused. “Where is your father?”

“My father runs the trade route to Riyel,” Beatrice explained. “I don’t expect him back for another few days.”

“He just leaves you at home?” Alexander asked, frowning.

“Yes,” Beatrice said with a slight shrug. “He has to provide somehow. And it’s better when he’s not home.”

“I see,” he said, still frowning. There were ways to provide without leaving your daughter home alone for days or weeks at a time, Alexander thought darkly, and your daughter should never think that it’s better without your presence. His opinion of her father was only going downhill the more he learned about him. He’d made inquiries about Beatrice and her father when she first started working for him, but he hadn’t realized just how little time Gerald Montgomery spent at home.

“If you are ready, my lord,” the priest said, looking between the two of them as he broke into Alexander’s thoughts.

“Of course,” Alexander said, turning his full attention to Beatrice. “Please begin.”

The priest turned to Beatrice. “You are willingly entering this marriage?” he asked, a frown creasing between his eyebrows.

“I am,” Beatrice said with a slight smile. “Thank you for your concern.”

The priest nodded and stepped forward. “Then we shall begin,” he said, and he started the shortest marriage ceremony possible, as Alexander had instructed.

Alexander couldn’t help but watch the woman who was soon to be his wife. He could only hope they would be happy for the length of their marriage, however short it might be. His eyes never left hers as the priest spoke. Even the shortest marriage ceremony, apparently, took longer than Alexander remembered.

But at the end of it, she would be his bride and would hopefully stand by his side through thick and thin.

“Beatrice Montgomery,” the priest began, “will you take this man to be your husband?”

Even though Alexander thought he knew the answer, he held his breath as he waited to hear what she would say.

“I will,” Beatrice said, her brown eyes filling with warmth.

“Do you, Lord Alexander Dunham, take this woman to be your wife?” the priest asked.

“I will,” Alexander replied, the words catching in his throat.

“By the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride,” the priest said, his eyes widening as he realized what he had just said. “I—I mean—”

But Alexander didn’t hesitate. He leaned forward, took Beatrice’s hand in his, and placed a gentle kiss on the back of her knuckles.

It might not be the wedding kiss most girls dreamed of, but it was all he was capable of at the moment.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“You're welcome,” she replied, a solemn smile gracing her face.

And just like that, with the simple exchange of vows and a quiet moment between them, their lives were bound together, forever altered by the vows they had taken and the uncertain path they were about to walk.

Chapter Five

Beatrice

BEATRICE ALLOWED HER HUSBAND to lead her toward the dining room, where he said Mrs. Jenkins had prepared a wedding meal for them.

The priest was staying to enjoy the meal, so Beatrice would not be alone with her new husband just yet, but he was leading her across the house, her hand resting on his arm, and she had never felt this way before.

She wasn't even sure she could describe how she felt, only that her stomach felt a little odd, and she wasn't sure if she would be able to eat any of the dinner that had been so carefully prepared for them in celebration of their wedding.

She had a husband now, and once the papers were sent to Riyel, she would officially be Lady Beatrice Dunham of Eldenwilde. Her throat felt tight. What would her father and her friends say?

Her father probably wouldn't even notice, except that she wouldn't be there to cook a meal for him when he was in the Northlands.

But Dietrich and his mother and Thea were sure to have opinions on the matter, and she wasn't sure what their opinions would be.

On one hand, she could see Thea being excited for her, and on the other hand, she could see Thea being appalled that she had married a man she barely knew.

As for Dietrich, well, he was likely to be upset that she'd gotten married without him there, and his mother would also be sad about that. The fact that Danise and Dietrich had missed her wedding hurt more than she had expected it to, but perhaps someday she would be able to have a simple ceremony with Lord Dunham that their loved ones could attend.

Although he didn't have any loved ones, so perhaps it was selfish of her to want a ceremony for her loved ones to witness. He had to have friends, though, right? It wasn't as if he'd been entirely alone for the past fifteen years or so since his parents had passed.

She couldn’t remember exactly how long it had been. She had only been maybe ten years old, and the death of two nobles was not something that affected her life much at that point. She might have remembered more about it had she known that someday Lord Dunham would hire her…or that one day she would be his wife.

They turned into the dining room, and he pulled out a chair for her. The heavy skirts of the new dress were more than she was used to, and she was grateful for the help. As she slipped into the chair and adjusted her skirt, Lord Dunham’s hand brushed against her shoulder as he pushed the chair in, and she had to stop herself from jumping.

It would take time to get used to him being so close to her.

“Lady Beatrice,” the priest said, suddenly drawing her attention from across the way. “I hope that you are well and that your library has been doing well?”

“It has been,” she said kindly. The library did not have much in the way of religious texts, so the priest was not often a visitor, though occasionally he came in for one of the tomes on gardening. He had been a staunch advocate for the library when it first began and many in town were unsure of how they felt about it, and she appreciated the support.

“What will happen to the library now?” he asked, glancing between the two of them.

“I would like Lady Dunham to appoint her successor,” Lord Dunham said as he settled into his own chair at the opposite end of the very long table. “I don’t suppose you’ve thought about it yet?” he asked, looking at her.

“I am hopeful that Eugenia may be interested in the role,” Beatrice said.

The priest nodded. “Yes, she would be well-suited to the task,” he said. “It would not take her from anything she’s currently doing, and she does enjoy seeing everyone in town.”

“It would require her to stay in one place for more than a few minutes,” Beatrice said with a grin, “which might be difficult for her.”

“That is true,” the priest said. “However, if we can convince her that enough people will come to her, that might do the trick.”

Beatrice nodded. “We shall see. I have no high hopes for her to actually stay put, but it would be nice if she did.”

Colette, the maid who had helped her earlier, entered with another girl Beatrice hadn’t met yet. She would have to make friends with all the staff

as soon as she could; if she was to be the mistress of Eldenwilde, she wanted to know all her people.

The maids began serving them food, and Beatrice smiled and thanked them, noting that Lord Dunham did not. Perhaps there was something to be said for the rumor that her husband was not the friendliest, though she'd seen nothing yet that could convince her he was as callous as the villagers would lead her to believe.

That was another stumbling block in her plan to convince Dietrich and Thea that she was fine—if only her husband had a better reputation in the community. As it was, she would have to do some convincing.

But she had been the first librarian in a town that did not value literature, and she had grown used to convincing people. If the people that needed to be convinced were Dietrich and Thea and her father, at least she knew what would make them more easily swayed, as opposed to the townspeople who did not give her such an advantage.

The meal passed quickly, with no one saying anything, just eating as quickly as possible. Before she knew it, Lord Dunham and the priest had gone back to his study, and she was alone.

She took a moment to take a deep breath as she looked around her new home.

The idea felt strange. This was home now?

She would have to go home at some point to get her things. Not that she would need clothes or any of the kitchenware that she used, but she wouldn't want to leave her books behind. They didn't deserve such a fate.

Even if her new husband had promised her a library.

Oh, the word "husband" felt strange.

She had a husband now.

Her, Beatrice Montgomery, the librarian whom no one in town had ever been interested in—except for Roan.

Beatrice didn't care, though. It was no longer her problem. Because she was married.

Beatrice took a deep breath and rose from her seat. She wasn't going to just sit here waiting for him to come back. Lord Dunham had been apologetic as he had led the priest away to do some paperwork, but he hadn't thought to tell her what she should do once he left her, and she had little idea what she should do to occupy her time.

So, she would explore.

As she opened the door, she nearly ran into Mrs. Jenkins. The friendly housekeeper smiled at Beatrice and said, “I was just looking for you, Lady Dunham. I thought perhaps you would like a tour.”

Beatrice nodded. “That would be lovely, Mrs. Jenkins.” As much as she wanted to protest the new title, she had a feeling Mrs. Jenkins was not going to budge on it. Perhaps she was right—she would have to get used to it eventually. Even if the idea still seemed strange.

She followed Mrs. Jenkins through the hallway and did her best to pay attention as she was ushered through a sitting room, through the foyer, and toward Lord Dunham’s study.

“And where is the library?” she asked. She had been so distracted earlier, she had no idea where the library was actually located.

Mrs. Jenkins smiled and led her to the library beyond the study, and Beatrice opened the doors to take it in once more without the distraction of her impending marriage.

It truly was the most stunning thing she’d ever seen in her life.

And this library was hers?

“It’s impressive, isn’t it?” Mrs. Jenkins asked as Beatrice sighed happily.

“It is,” Beatrice said, already itching to disappear into a chair and read a book.

“Would you like to see the kitchen too?” the housekeeper asked.

“I would,” Beatrice said, nodding. “I would like to meet everyone if that’s possible.”

“Of course, my lady.” Mrs. Jenkins led the way through the servants’ door and toward the kitchen, where everyone stopped what they were doing to stare as she announced, “Everyone, this is the new Lady Dunham.”

There was a whirlwind of introductions, too many to remember, and a few moments later, Beatrice was being led from the kitchen back into the dining room, a full circle of the first floor complete.

“I must return to my duties, but before I do, let me show you to your room,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “Now that you've had a little more of the house shown to you, it might be helpful to orient yourself to your room again, too.”

Beatrice agreed that it would be helpful and followed Mrs. Jenkins up the grand staircase from before. As they entered the stunning room she had

been in earlier, she turned to the housekeeper. “This is truly my room?” she asked.

Mrs. Jenkins smiled. “It is. Now, we haven’t a lady’s maid on the premises, but one of the girls, Guinevere, is talented with hair and such. I've asked her to come take the position of your lady’s maid for the time being, and we can decide in a week or so if you'd rather have a formally trained maid from the city. She’ll be up in the morning to take care of you, and I’ll help you with anything you need tonight.”

“I’m sure Guinevere will be lovely,” Beatrice assured Mrs. Jenkins. She had no need of a lady’s maid, except maybe to do up her dresses if they were all as complicated as the one she was currently wearing. “Do you suppose Lord Dunham would mind if I joined them in his study?”

Mrs. Jenkins gave her a smile. “I’m sure he would be delighted to see you.”

Beatrice doubted that. The man barely knew her.

But since she knew him more than she knew anyone else here, and Mrs. Jenkins had her own work to do, it seemed best to go see him and discuss what she should do with her days.

She had no experience with being a lady, and thus far hadn’t been told much of what she was expected to do in that role. Some clarification would be useful before she decided to spend all of her days in the library reading.

Perhaps she could ask for some paper to make a list of everything she needed to do. She needed to make sure her library was taken care of, her things were fetched from her house, and her friends were told where she was.

Yes, a visit to the study was in order.

And maybe she would get to pet the kitten she had spotted earlier.

As she made her way back down the grand staircase, her heart pounded in an unfamiliar rhythm. The feeling surprised her. Why should she be nervous? She was only going to Lord Dunham’s study, a room she had been in plenty of times before.

Though this would be the first time she would enter the room as his wife.

Chapter Six

Alexander

ALEXANDER OPENED THE DOOR to his study just in time to watch his new wife descend the staircase. She was absolutely stunning, dressed in the blue gown his mother had worn so often, her chestnut hair tumbling down around her face in waves that looked absolutely effortless.

The word “wife” felt strange, and yet, also completely normal.

“Hello,” he said as she approached, smiling at him.

She was shorter than he’d realized. He’d never been so close to her, except for their wedding ceremony, and he’d been rather distracted then. “I don’t suppose you would like to go for a walk with me?” he said.

She glanced at the window, then back at him.

“I know it’s cold out,” he added, “but I enjoy getting a little fresh air in the evenings before I retire, and I thought perhaps you would like to see a little more of your new home.”

Beatrice smiled at him. “That would be lovely, my lord.”

“It’s Alexander,” he reminded her.

“That would be lovely, Lord Alexander,” she said, with an impish grin.

He could acknowledge the effort she was making, even if he would rather her be more comfortable with him. “I will accept that for now,” he warned, “but I hope that you will soon consider using my name, Lady Beatrice.”

“We shall see,” she responded.

“Shall we?” he asked, offering his arm. “Let us see if your cloak is still around here somewhere.”

Before he could even call, Jenkins had appeared with his coat and Beatrice’s cloak in hand.

“That is what you came in?” he asked, staring at the lightweight cloak, the shame of not sending a carriage for her once again rushing through him. “I cannot apologize enough, my lady.”

“It is perfectly all right,” Beatrice said, as Jenkins helped her with her cloak. “I am used to the cold, my lord.”

“Be that as it may,” he responded, “I should know better than to expect a lady to walk miles through the snow.”

“But this morning, I was not a lady,” Beatrice teased, her eyes bright. “So it is not your fault, and you should not blame yourself.”

Alexander nodded toward her. “I will accept your grace,” he said, “and promise to do better in the future.”

She smiled widely, and he offered his arm as Jenkins opened the front door for them.

He hadn't yet been outside today, and the cold whipped right through him with the northern wind howling around the corner of the building. “Was it this bitter this morning?” he asked, turning to her with wide eyes.

“No more shame, my lord,” she reminded him, clutching his arm tighter. “I survived, and you were more than generous in helping me to warm myself by the fire when I did arrive. And I dare say that I should not expect to be that cold again for quite a long time, maybe even the rest of my life.”

Alexander agreed. Not if he had his way.

As Jenkins closed the door behind them, a blur of orange shot out and settled between Alexander’s feet.

“Who is this?” Beatrice exclaimed in a bright voice as she crouched down to pet Rose.

She was still in her kitten form. She must not be ready to trust Beatrice with her true form yet.

“This is Rose,” Alexander said. “I named her after the rose bushes I found her under.” He had been more surprised than anyone to find the tiny dragon in his garden, and his surprise had only grown when the tiny hatchling transformed into an orange striped kitten in front of his eyes. But transformation or not, leaving her outside hadn’t seemed smart.

And as much as he wanted to share both of his secrets with Beatrice, he could not.

Rose’s identity wasn’t his to share, and even if he wanted to share the details of his curse, it wouldn’t let him.

He waited for a moment until Beatrice stood, smiling down at Rose, and took his arm again. Though they both wore multiple layers, the warm pressure of her hand on his arm was reassuring.

Even if she didn’t know everything, he was no longer alone.

He had always had Jenkins and his wife, but they had kept themselves apart, and he had become very lonely. To have a wife of his own filled a hole inside him that he hadn’t realized existed.

“One moment,” he said, kneeling down and letting Rose climb up onto his shoulder.

“Is your kitten riding on your shoulder?” Beatrice asked, raising her eyebrows at him. “Is that normal for her?”

“It is,” Alexander said, reaching up to scratch Rose under the chin. She purred and rubbed her head against his, digging her claws into his shoulder to hold on. “She’s a strange one.”

“I can see that.” Beatrice’s grip on his arm tightened as the wind began to blow harder.

“Let me show you the gardens,” he said, leading her forward.

“Isn’t it winter?” Beatrice asked with a smile.

“Yes,” he admitted. “But we have a greenhouse, and I think one of our gardeners must have a magic thumb, because our garden tends to remain beautiful for uncommonly long. I believe we even have a few rose bushes still blooming.”

As he spoke, the words filled him with a sense of doubt. Did he have someone on his staff who could use magic? And if he did, would they be able to help him at all? The thought had never occurred to him, but maybe Rose was in his garden for a reason. Maybe she had been drawn there by magic. It had seemed the rose bushes should have long since faded for the year when he had found her curled up underneath them.

As they turned the corner of the manor house and came into view of the greenhouse, a young woman backed out of it with a bucket of dirt in her hands, the door closing behind her. When she saw them, she bobbed a small curtsy, despite her full hands.

“Hello, my lord,” she said.

Alexander nodded. “Hello. May I introduce to you Lady Beatrice Dunham, my wife?” The words felt foreign, and yet they filled him with a warm glow that battled the wind.

“Congratulations, my lord, my lady,” the gardener said, curtsying again. “I believe I am to be Lady Dunham’s maid for the time being,” she said. “I was just finishing in the greenhouse before I ventured inside to clean up.”

Beside him, Beatrice perked up. “You must be Guinevere,” she said, her smile wide enough to brighten her whole face.

“That’s me, my lady,” Guinevere said with an echoing smile, her gaze settling upon the cat perched on his shoulder before looking at him again.

“Is the greenhouse presentable?” he asked.

“Yes, it is, my lord,” Guinevere said, before scurrying out of the way. “I hope you enjoy it.”

Beatrice waited until Guinevere had retreated down the path and turned the corner before turning to him. “You could smile at them,” she said, her eyes dancing merrily. “I think you may have scared her half to death.”

“What do you mean?” he protested. “I just asked if the greenhouse was presentable.”

“In a tone that implied it was her fault if it wasn’t,” Beatrice said, tsking at him. “Now, let me see this greenhouse. I do love flowers.”

Despite the scolding, it felt as if the warmth of her smile should have melted the snow that surrounded them.

“Of course, my lady,” he said, opening the door for her.

Beatrice stepped inside and sighed dreamily as she took in the sights of the greenhouse. It was full of beautiful flowers, blooming long past when they should have due to the warm air, and it was perhaps his favorite place on his estate. He reached out and plucked a rose, offering it to his new wife with a slight bow.

“For you, my lady,” he said.

“Thank you, kind sir,” his wife said, bringing the flower to her nose and taking a deep breath. “It smells wonderful. I’ve never been in a greenhouse before—I can’t believe you have this many flowers still in bloom.”

“I told you,” he said. “It’s quite impressive, isn’t it?”

“I think I could stay in this greenhouse for the rest of my life,” Beatrice said as she turned in a circle to take in the full effect.

He could spend the rest of his life here, too—with her and the flowers and the warmth from the sunshine, and the hope that maybe his wife would be exactly what he needed.

The fact that he had a wife felt odd, and yet somehow, so right.

“I think we should go in,” he said. She was probably growing cold, even in the warmer environment of the greenhouse. He’d have to see about getting warmer clothing for her. “We can explore more tomorrow, if you’d like.”

“I would like that,” Beatrice said with a smile as he opened the greenhouse door for her. “I am looking forward to learning more about the estate.”

“And I look forward to showing it to you,” he said, offering his arm.

Why did the world feel brighter when she accepted?

He’d never considered what it would be like to have a wife that he wanted to spend time with, but he didn’t want to say good night to Beatrice. Perhaps it was because she had always seemed to see the real him, or perhaps it was the way she always smiled at him, but it was confusing.

Why did she change everything?

But he didn’t have time to puzzle through it all tonight. His wife was shivering, and the light was beginning to fade, and he ought to return to his study and get a little more work done before bed. He should send a few things to Riyel with the messenger who was bringing their marriage license to the king, but that was work he didn’t particularly feel like doing when he could instead spend time with Beatrice—which was odd, because he shouldn’t have wanted to spend this much time with her. And yet...

She was beginning to shake, and he should have noticed sooner. He was freezing her for the second time today—he needed to be more considerate of his wife’s comfort, even if she did enjoy being outdoors.

He led her through the hedges and pulled her closer to his side when the path narrowed. It made for a convenient excuse, when really, he just wanted her to share some of his warmth. He almost expected her to lean away from him but instead, she moved closer, her side pressing up against him as they walked.

It was more connection than Alexander had felt with another human since his parents had passed away. It was almost too much, a flood of emotion roaring through his body.

His head urged him to pull away, to avoid the connection, to avoid being hurt again.

But his heart urged him to pull her ever closer.

Beatrice was shorter than him, though not by too much. In fact, she fit against his side like she’d been made to do so.

He would dream about this moment tonight.

Not only because it was the first time he’d had a wife, but because his new wife felt so right.

Alexander opened the front door and ushered his wife into the warmth of the foyer, his hand resting on her lower back. Rose jumped off his shoulder as they entered the house, landing on her feet and launching into a run.

Beatrice laughed as she watched the kitten run away before turning to him with a smile as he helped take off her cloak.

“Thank you for showing me the greenhouse,” she said, her eyes warm and bright.

Not for the first time, Alexander wondered why she had said yes to him. Surely, he was not the only person who had noticed Beatrice Montgomery and been interested in her…and for some strange reason, she had chosen him, of all people.

He was the luckiest fellow in the world.

“I hope you have a good night,” he said, awkwardly. What did you say to a woman who, less than twelve hours ago had no idea that she was going to marry you, and was now your wife? “I must work, but Mrs. Jenkins will see to your needs tonight, and Guinevere will assist you tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Beatrice said with a smile.

Alexander gave her a slight bow, surprising himself—but it felt like the right thing to do. “Good night, my lady,” he said.

“Good night, my lord,” she responded with a sweet smile before he turned and walked away.

Did she ever stop smiling?

She was dangerous, and he should keep his distance.

It would be far too easy to fall in love with his wife, and the future was far too unknown. Perhaps if he was not afraid of a sorcerer coming back, he could let himself enjoy her company. But until his birthday, it was better to keep his distance. Until he knew, for better or for worse, what would happen.

Falling for his wife was an unnecessary distraction, and he would avoid it entirely.

Chapter Seven

Beatrice

BEATRICE WOKE SEVERAL TIMES during the night, which was unusual for her. But then again, so was sleeping in a bed that was nearly the size of her entire room back home.

More than once, she thought she heard sounds coming from the room on the other side of the door—the door that Mrs. Jenkins had nodded meaningfully toward when she had mentioned her new husband. It didn't take much to realize that Lord Dunham probably lay in a bed much like this one on the other side of the wall…not that she had any interest in seeing for herself.

She was more than happy to pretend that she was not that close to his chambers.

When she woke yet again, there was light streaming into the room, and she hurried out of bed and made her way to the windows. What did the view look like in the early morning?

The warm glow of sunrise streamed in through the window, and she opened the window for a moment. The fire had died down and the room was already cold, but the fresh air was worth it. It looked as if it had snowed more, and the air was so bitter she had to close the window almost immediately, but she didn't regret letting the breeze into the room.

She had only been married overnight, and she was already feeling a bit stifled in the new role that she had to play.

But perhaps learning more about the people of the estate would help her to feel more fulfilled in the role. If she had to give up her librarian job, she could at least learn how to help the people who relied on Lord Dunham, much like she had until yesterday.

That would be her task today—learning more about the Dunham estate. About Eldenwilde.

It was a beautiful name for a beautiful estate, and yet she still wasn't sure if she would ever grow used to being its mistress.

The door opened with a bang, and Beatrice turned to see Guinevere entering, a grimace on her face. “I’m so sorry, my lady,” she said, her arms full of gowns. “Mrs. Jenkins sent me with these, and I didn’t realize the door would be so loud when I used my foot to open it.”

Beatrice laughed and hurried over to help the maid. “No need to apologize,” she said. “Goodness gracious, where did she find more gowns? I thought the wardrobe was full of more than enough.”

“It seems those were not all of them,” Guinevere said as she placed them on the bed. “I shall hang these after you go down to breakfast. What are your plans for the day, my lady?”

Beatrice gave her a little grin. “I don’t suppose I can convince you to call me Beatrice?” she asked with a hopeful tone.

“No, my lady,” Guinevere said with a grin as she went to the wardrobe and began looking through the dresses there. “I’m afraid we were told last night, in no uncertain terms, that you were the lady of the house.”

Beatrice raised an eyebrow. Lord Dunham had told everyone she was the lady of the house? When had he done that?

“What else did you hear?” Beatrice asked.

“That as the lady of the house, we are to afford you every respect due to your station, and to help you with anything you require.”

“Anything?” Beatrice asked, a million mischievous possibilities running through her mind. What she could do with the ability to do anything? Not that she would. She wouldn’t take advantage of Lord Dunham that way, even if the idea of being allowed to do anything she wanted sounded fun. “So, if I wanted to take a tour of the estate, I could do that?”

“Of course, my lady,” Guinevere said, coming back with a dress in her arms. “I would be happy to give you a tour if that is what you desire, unless Lord Dunham wishes to show you around.”

“Is that what a lady’s maid does?” Beatrice asked.

After thinking for a moment, Guinevere admitted, “I don’t know.”

“Me neither,” Beatrice said, and Guinevere let out a chuckle.

“I suppose you wouldn’t,” she said. “Is it true that you were the librarian in town?”

Beatrice nodded.

“I never made it to the library in town,” Guinevere added. “We have the books here, you know, and I only go to town a few times a year. I don’t know what it will look like now, though. Maybe I’ll go to town with you?”

Beatrice took a deep breath. She had changed more than her own life in the moment she became Lady Dunham.

“I don’t know how it works either,” she admitted. “But speaking of town, can you please confirm that Lord Dunham sent a message to my friends in town? If Thea does not hear from me soon, she will send out a search party herself.”

“Thea certainly wastes no time when it comes to her friends,” Guinevere said as she began helping Beatrice into the gown.

“Oh, you know Thea?” Beatrice asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you at the café.”

“I’ve seen you there before,” Guinevere said with a smile. “But I don’t go often, and you are usually laughing with your friends when I do go. Do you not have an agreement with the young man I often see you with?” Then she blushed. “I’m sorry, that was an impertinent question. Forgive me, my lady.”

Beatrice laughed. “Dietrich? No, he and I are good friends who grew up together, but nothing more. But he will also be concerned for me if he does not hear that I am safe, and I would not be surprised if Thea sent him out this way.”

“He sounds like a good friend,” Guinevere said as she led Beatrice to the mirrored table against the wall. Beatrice sat at the seat in front of it, and Guinevere began pulling her hair away from her face.

“You have beautiful hair, my lady,” Guinevere said. “Fortunately, I do know what to do with hair. It may be the only quality I have that lends itself to being a lady’s maid, though.”

Beatrice looked up at Guinevere and smiled at her in the mirror. “I am glad that you are by my side for this adventure,” she said. “We shall figure it out together, and I think you and I shall be good friends.”

“I hope so, my lady,” Guinevere said. “Friends have been in short supply for me.”

“I hope so too,” Beatrice said. “Otherwise, I’m afraid I would be very lonely here. And I am very much looking forward to you becoming my friend.”

It might be the hardest thing about her new position as Lady Dunham. She had grown accustomed to visiting the café every morning and meeting her friends there and seeing all the patrons of the library.

She gasped. “The library! I also need to know if Lord Dunham has found anyone to take over the library. I cannot leave it unopened for long. I would suggest Eugenia to take over the position, at least temporarily.”

“I shall speak to Jenkins about it as soon as I am done with your hair, while you are breaking your fast. I believe Lord Dunham is waiting for you,” Guinevere said.

At the mention of his name, Beatrice’s stomach was suddenly full of butterflies, or perhaps a more violent winged animal—crows, maybe. “He’s waiting for me?” she asked, and to her embarrassment, her voice cracked at the words.

Maybe Guinevere hadn’t noticed.

Guinevere noticed, though, and gave her a look that Beatrice couldn’t quite decipher. “Yes, I believe he wished to break his fast with his wife. Should I send your regrets and ask for a tray instead?”

“No.” Beatrice shook her head. “I am able to face my husband. I have no qualms about dining with him. I was surprised, that’s all.”

Her voice wobbled on the words, and once again, Guinevere said nothing, but swiftly finished arranging her hair before smiling at her in the mirror. “You look beautiful, my lady. Your husband will be in awe of you.”

Beatrice assessed herself in the mirror. She had to admit Guinevere was right—she did have a skill with hair. It had been artfully arranged in a woven plait from the crown of her head to the nape of her neck. The rest of the braided hair swept over her shoulder, making it easy to contain when she put a cloak hood on. The dress that Guinevere had chosen was warm, made of wool, and would make her trip outdoors to tour the estate much more comfortable than the simple cotton dress she had worn to walk to the estate the day before. Guinevere had also found a pair of warm and sturdy boots for Beatrice’s feet.

“Thank you,” Beatrice said.

“Of course. Do you remember the way to the dining room, my lady?” Guinevere asked.

“Yes,” Beatrice said. “Will you see about sending word to town for me?”

“Of course, my lady,” Guinevere said, before hurrying out the door.

Beatrice followed her and then realized that Guinevere was heading for the servants’ staircase at the other end of the hallway. She turned around, her cheeks heating, as she made her way toward the grand staircase.

She would get used to this eventually, right?

She placed her hand on the banister and began walking down the stairs, careful not to trip over the slightly too-long length of her dress.

“Which way was the dining room again?” she wondered aloud, trying to think back to the night before. All she could remember was that Mrs. Jenkins had led her there. Was it through the sitting room?

As she reached the bottom of the staircase, her toe caught on the hem of the dress, and she fell down the last step.

She lay on the floor, unsure if she should laugh or cry, when the sound of a door opening caught her attention, and a moment later, her husband loomed over her.

“Are you all right?” he asked, offering a hand to help her up.

“I am,” Beatrice said, feeling her whole face redden as he helped, his other hand coming to her elbow to steady her as she stood. “Doesn't everyone fall down the stairs on their way to breakfast?”

Lord Dunham's cheeks twitched. He might have almost smiled as his hand slid down her arm to take her other hand.

“I personally don't make a habit of that,” he said. He hadn't let go of her hands yet, though she was already standing, and the warmth of his hands felt so good.

Beatrice tried to tell herself it was simply because her fingers were cold.

“Thank you,” she said, pulling her hands out of his.

“Of course,” he said, offering his arm. “What kind of husband would I be if I didn't help my wife off the floor after she decided to fall down the stairs?”

“You’re such a gentleman, my lord,” she said.

“Alexander,” he reminded her gently as she took his arm.

“Lord Alexander,” she said, hoping her tone was enough to show that she was teasing him.

“Lady Beatrice,” he said, raising an eyebrow at her.

It wasn’t a smile, but it might as well be for him.

He might not smile much, but perhaps she would enjoy their conversations if this dry humor made more of an appearance.

Perhaps she could enjoy this marriage.

Chapter Eight

Alexander

HE HAD KNOWN THAT Beatrice Montgomery was an interesting girl, but Alexander hadn't been prepared for how quickly she had turned things upside down for him.

He hadn’t expected to find his wife on the floor at the bottom of the stairs when he’d heard the noise from inside his study, but from the moment he’d offered a hand to help her up, his heart hadn’t slowed to its normal beat.

Perhaps he should have expected marriage to be more life-changing than he'd thought. But since it was simply a marriage of convenience, he hadn't expected to find himself so concerned about his new wife. The fear that had gripped his heart when he saw her lying on the floor had surprised him.

Although, to be fair, he probably would have felt the same fear had it been Jenkins falling down the stairs.

The image of his butler falling down the stairs was almost enough to make him laugh. If Jenkins was ever undignified enough to fall down the stairs, he might suspect that the butler himself was dying.

“What made you fall?” he asked, turning to glance at the staircase behind him.

“These dresses are just a bit too long,” Beatrice said, smoothing her free hand over the front of the beautiful gown she wore. He recognized it as another one of his mother’s.

“I see,” he said. “My mother must have been just a little taller than you.”

“This was your mother's?” she asked, looking down at the gown with new appreciation. “She had very good taste.”

“Yes, she did,” Alexander said fondly. “It was always said she was one of the best-dressed in a room, though I'm sure her dresses are out of fashion now.”

Beatrice shook her head. “I don't care if they are out of fashion. I'm honored to wear something so beautiful, especially since it was worn by your mother.”

Alexander's heart warmed at her words. “Thank you,” he said gruffly, resting his free hand on hers where it laid on his arm. “I agree. You are beautiful.”

Beatrice looked up at him, her eyes wide, and he realized what he had just said. But he couldn't bring himself to take the words back. Even if he hadn’t meant to say them, it was true. She was beautiful. Her hair was pulled back in a loose braid, the top braided in an intricate pattern.

“Was the maid Mrs. Jenkins assigned to you helpful?” he asked, gesturing to her hair. “I'm assuming this is her handiwork.”

“It is,” Beatrice said with a smile. “Guinevere is lovely. Thank you. I have no doubts that we will get along wonderfully.”

“I'm glad to hear it,” Alexander said. “Shall we go to breakfast?”

“We shall. But first, I have a confession,” Beatrice said, looking up at him with a winning smile. “I am rather glad that you heard me fall and came out.”

“So I could help you up?” he asked.

Beatrice shook her head. “No, that was a lovely side benefit. But…I couldn't remember how to get to the dining room, even though I told Guinevere that I did.”

Alexander’s lips quirked up. “Why didn't you ask her to show you?” he asked.

Beatrice shrugged as they entered the dining room. “I don't know,” she said. “By the time I realized what I had told her, it was too late. She was already gone, so I just found the stairs and hoped that from there, I would somehow remember my way to the dining room.”

Alexander fought the urge to roll his eyes. Of course, he had picked the most independent woman he could find to be his bride. It was a trait that would serve her well in her new position, although it might make for some interesting situations as they came to know each other in the days to come.

“I'm glad I was able to assist you,” he said, as he ushered her to the seat at the foot of the table that she’d used the previous night and pulled it out for her. His hand brushed against her hair as she sat and he pushed in the seat, the chestnut strands sliding over his hand smoothly.

What would it feel like to run his fingers through her hair?

He jerked his hand back and walked across the dining room to the head of the table. He had no intention of falling for his wife, and the less touch there was involved, the better. Even if the sorcerer never came back, he didn't want to fall for his wife. He didn't want a love match, or a woman who would die for him, as he would die for her.

He'd grown used to being alone and while he might have needed a wife, he didn't need to fall in love with her.

Perhaps he'd known that it would be harder to avoid falling in love with Beatrice than it would be if he'd chosen some other young lady. He had always felt drawn to her for some strange reason that he couldn't understand.

Maybe it was the way she was fiercely independent, but she was willing to work with others when it was necessary. Or perhaps it was the way she always treated him as though he were a man, not some sort of god. Or maybe it was simply the way she smelled wonderful at all times.

It didn't matter. Beatrice Montgomery was dangerous, and he would be wise to stay far, far away.

They spoke little during the meal, their seats far enough across the table that it was necessary to raise one's voice to be heard, which was not conducive to conversations.

Perhaps it was better that way.

He could spend time with her this way, without getting emotionally tangled.

As they finished breaking their fast together, Jenkins came in to greet them. "My lord, my lady," he said, nodding respectfully to both of them. "I heard from Guinevere that Lady Dunham is interested in a tour of the estate today."

Alexander turned to Beatrice, who smiled. "Yes, that would be lovely," she said. "Guinevere offered to take me around if you are busy."

Alexander shook his head. "I will take you," he said. "It would be good for the people of the estate to see me with my wife."

If something happened to him, they needed to accept her as his bride.

And…it would be nice to spend more time with her. Even if he shouldn't.

"Are you ready now," Beatrice asked, "or do you have pressing tasks that must be done first? I can wait, if you have things you must do."

“There is nothing more pressing than spending time with you,” he said, the words coming out before he could stop them.

They shouldn’t have come out, but somehow, he didn’t regret them. That definitely had nothing to do with the way she lit up when he said them.

He could have waited for Jenkins to help with her cloak, but he didn't. Instead, he opened the closet and pulled it out, helping her fasten it over her shoulders. She smiled up at him as he did, but he didn't return her smile.

He stepped back and reached for his own coat, ignoring her for a moment.

Why did she affect him so much? He wasn't sure…and he didn’t want to find out.

He let Jenkins open the front door and offered his arm to Beatrice as they walked out the door and down the stairs, Guinevere following them for some reason.

It would be ungentlemanly not to offer his arm, and as much as he didn't want to get closer, he couldn't resist the opportunity to feel her touch.

It was concerning just how much he wanted to be near her all the time, because he’d had no intention of letting her get this close. Yet somehow, she had wormed her way in, and they had only been married for half a day.

What would it be like when they had been married a full week—or even longer?

How long would his heart be able to withstand her?

Probably not as long as he needed it to. He was not prepared to fall in love with his wife, and he needed to find a way to stop it. But what was the harm in letting her hold his arm while they walked through his estate? Surely, being chivalrous wouldn’t cause him issues.

He showed her around the buildings closest to the manor, the stables and the outbuildings where they stored food and other things. She wouldn’t have much use for those buildings, but it would be good for her to know where everything was. Besides, those buildings were warmer than outside, so it was nice to linger there for a while.

Beatrice exclaimed in delight when his horse held out her nose for attention and laughed at the antics of the yearling goats, who chased each other around the pen for her benefit.

“My friend has goats,” she told him, her eyes dancing with amusement. “Or at least she had them.”

“Had?” he asked.

“She’s now Lady Sophia Manning,” she said, and it was his turn to be surprised. He'd heard of the “goat girl” who was marrying Caspian Rendon, but hadn't realized Beatrice knew her.

“You'll have to tell me their story sometime,” he said. “I’ve only heard hints of it.” He'd been invited to the wedding, of course, but he hadn’t planned on attending.

Caspian had been much younger than Alexander, but the Rendon brothers were some of Alexander’s only childhood friends. Quite a few of his happiest childhood memories involved Lord and Lady Rendon and their boys.

And now that he was married to Lady Sophia’s friend, he probably wouldn’t escape going to the wedding. The thought of attending such a crowded event made his heart beat faster and he took a deep breath.

It would be good to see the Rendons again, even if being so vulnerable was absolutely terrifying.

“I hope we can invite them for dinner,” Beatrice said shyly, “and you can hear it from them.”

Alexander took another deep breath. She wanted him to invite people to Eldenwilde?

That was maybe going too far.

But images of goofing off with the Rendon brothers around the table flashed through his mind, and the corner of his mouth turned up before he could stop it.

They had all grown, but maybe they would still be interested in being his friend.

If he made it through his birthday without a murderer smiting him where he stood, he would have to invite them out for dinner.

“I think that's a lovely idea,” he said, and Beatrice lit up.

“I shall write her soon and ask when they will be back in the Northlands,” she said. “I believe they are in Riyel at the moment, but they should be coming back for the holidays.”

“I look forward to it,” Alexander said, surprised to find the words coming out of his mouth. “Now, would you like to meet some of the tenants?”

“Yes, please.” Her eyes shone with interest as Alexander turned toward the area where most of the tenants lived. “How many tenants do you

have?”

“We have quite a few now. There were more when my father was in charge, but after he passed, several of them moved on. I don’t blame them after what happened.”

Beatrice looked up at him, her eyes speaking in a way that suggested she wasn’t likely to verbalize her thoughts.

Alexander sighed. He hadn’t wanted to get into it right now, but the words had slipped out of his mouth before he had thought through what saying them would mean. He should have known better than to say something around her and expect her not to show interest.

“There was a fire,” he said, his curse stopping him from speaking further, and Beatrice frowned.

“They never found where it started,” Guinevere supplied after a moment, when Beatrice’s frown persisted and the silence grew too long. “There was some question as to whether it was natural or not.”

Alexander took a deep breath. Perhaps it was fortunate that Guinevere had come along; maybe she could fill in the blanks where he couldn’t say anything and make Beatrice wonder what had happened. If someone asked questions, sometimes the words could slip through, and maybe Beatrice was curious enough to figure out that something wasn’t quite right.

Even if Beatrice didn’t connect all the dots on her own, Guinevere was suddenly looking at him with eyes far too keen. Did she know more than she was letting on?

The thought of someone else figuring it out filled him with hope.

He still wasn’t sure how the sorcerer would react to him having a wife, but the thought of him arriving with his daughter made his stomach turn. Maybe it wouldn’t change anything if Beatrice found out, but at least he wouldn’t be alone anymore.

He just wanted to tell her, but he couldn’t.

The words wouldn’t come out, no matter how much he wanted them to.

Chapter Nine

Beatrice

AS THEY MADE THEIR way to the first tenant's cottage, Beatrice puzzled over the fact that Lord Alexander wasn’t telling her everything about the fire.

Was it the one that had killed his parents?

Was it a different fire?

Was he silent only because it was a painful memory, or was there something else there?

She couldn’t think long, though, because soon they were drawing near to the first cottage.

She had never visited the tenants as the lady of the estate before, but she knew many of the families from her time in town. They would come to town occasionally to shop or for events put on by the school.

The children walked into town to go to school in the warm months, but in the winter, it wasn't practical for them to come. She was lucky to see them a few times a month when the snow was easier to traverse, and she was hoping to see a few of her favorites here.

She allowed them to take out more books in the winter so that they had something to read if the weather turned, so they might not even know that she was no longer the librarian.

Would the children be sad that she was no longer the one presiding over their books?

She’d always been happy to purchase more children’s books with her salary. She had never told her father just how much she made, so she had plenty to spend on books. She probably shouldn't have kept it from him, but if she hadn't, he would have spent it all himself.

She wanted that money to go toward something other than funding the tavern, so she bought more books with it.

It was well worth it to see the smiles on the children's faces.

“Here we are,” Lord Alexander said as he knocked on the door of the first cottage and it opened almost immediately.

Beatrice was pleasantly surprised to find a large, cheerful home with two bedrooms, judging by the number of doors, and a warm fire. Several children were seated at the table, engrossed in books.

The sight instantly made her smile.

The cheerful woman who opened the door greeted them with a smile and Beatrice grinned. She knew her already. “I was wondering if we’d see you, my lord,” she said to Lord Alexander with a wink.

“Oh, you heard the news already?” Lord Alexander replied, pretending to frown, though Beatrice could see the twinkle in his eyes. He had probably hoped the news would spread.

“I heard she’s a girl from town,” the woman said, turning to Beatrice with a smile. Recognition dawned on her face. “Oh, hello, Miss Beatrice. Are you the new Lady Dunham then?”

“I am,” Beatrice said, smiling at the woman and the baby on her hip. “I see the children are enjoying their books.”

Mrs. Dorman had been one of the first to come to the library and collect books for her children. “They are,” Mrs. Dorman said with a wide smile. “We’re finishing up that adventure novel you gave us, and when I can’t read to them, they’re busy reading their own books.”

Lord Alexander raised his eyebrows. “Adventure novel? I don’t remember that being in the collection I gave you.”

Beatrice shrugged. “I may have expanded the collection on my own a bit.”

“With what funds?” Lord Alexander asked.

“My salary,” Beatrice replied with a grin. “So you can’t reprimand me. Consider it my own personal book collection that I simply shared with everyone.”

“I wasn’t going to reprimand you,” Lord Alexander said with a shake of his head. “I was going to tell you that you should have asked me if you wanted funds to buy more books. I would have paid for them.”

Beatrice widened her eyes. “You would have given me more money for books? My salary was enough to purchase them without any financial strain. I didn’t need more.”

Lord Alexander gave a half-hearted shrug. “They were important to my mother, and they’re important to you. I think that should be rewarded. And

I’m sorry that I did not think to offer a fund specifically for helping to expand the library.”

“We can offer it to the next librarian, because you’re right, they’re important.”

“They’re important to me, too,” a tiny voice piped up from the table. Beatrice turned to see the youngest Dorman girl, maybe six or seven years old, who had just begun to read. Finding new books for her was one of Beatrice’s great joys. “This one’s the best one yet,” she said enthusiastically.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Beatrice said with a smile. She had never asked Mrs. Dorman where they lived, and finding them at Eldenwilde was a wonderful surprise.

“We just wanted to stop in and say hello,” Lord Alexander said. “We have a few more stops to make.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Dorman said with a smile. “You’re welcome anytime, especially you, Miss Beatrice—I mean, Lady Dunham.”

Mrs. Dorman bobbed a small curtsy, and Beatrice felt a pang of discomfort. For the first time, becoming Lady Dunham felt like a barrier between her and the people she had known as the librarian.

“Thank you,” Beatrice said with a smile, addressing everyone in the room before allowing Lord Alexander to open the door and lead her toward the next home

Each house was similar—full of cheerful women with happy children, and most of them familiar faces from the library. In fact, nearly all the patrons of her library seemed to be from this estate.

Did none of the other estates have tenants who enjoyed reading? She had known that not many from the village had visited, but she hadn’t expected nearly all her patrons to come from one estate, especially since Eldenwilde was the farthest from town.

She would have to work with Eugenia to expand the circle of readers to include those from the other estates. Perhaps they should start a library cart to bring books around to people who couldn’t get to town easily. Even if the tenants didn't expect them at first, she didn't think the nobility would have a problem with it, and she knew how important it was for the people of the region to read.

Reading was the thing that had perhaps the single biggest impact on her life, and she wanted the chance to share that with more children and

adults.

Books had offered her freedom when she had been old enough to stay at home, but too young to escape her father's attention. While he had never hurt her, he could be a bit cruel at times, and reading had brought her to other worlds, far away from the cutting remarks. She hoped no one else would ever be in the same position she had been in, but she knew all too well that there were other people who needed a distraction, whatever their reason might be.

Beatrice pondered this as they made their way back to the manor. She had met most of the tenants, all of whom had welcomed her warmly, especially those who knew her as Beatrice the librarian.

“I didn’t realize so many of your tenants shared your mother’s love for reading,” Beatrice said to Alexander as they walked toward the front door.

“I encourage them to take time to read,” Alexander said as he opened the front door. “My mother was the one who started it, of course. But when my father realized that our tenants made better decisions about their farming and their households when they read books about those topics, he was on board with my mother’s plan.”

“Do they get the books from the library in town only, or do you have a library here for them as well?” Beatrice asked as Alexander helped her remove her cloak, handing it to Jenkins, who had appeared out of nowhere.

“Yes, we have a few books for them here,” he said, “but the majority come from your library. I wanted the farming books my father had gathered to be available to anyone. Although I have ordered a second copy of some to keep here, since they were in such high demand.”

Beatrice’s mind was whirling, and she accepted his arm automatically as they started walking down the hallway. “And they all enjoy reading?” she asked. It was surprising, given that so few in town seemed to share the same passion.

“Most of them do,” Alexander said, leading her past his study toward the library. “Let me show you their section of the library.”

Beatrice paused inside the door, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

She could live on the estate for the rest of her life and never tire of entering this room.

“I still don’t believe you gave me most of the books,” Beatrice said as she opened her eyes and glanced around at the mostly full shelves.

“I said I gave you a large portion,” Alexander’s voice rumbled beside her. “But this room could not be emptied without ruining its glory. Don’t you think?”

Beatrice could hardly find the words to respond. “I agree,” she finally managed, spinning in a circle to take in the full effect of the room yet again. Even though she’d seen it all before, it was still overwhelming to take in the sheer magnitude of the library.

Alexander chuckled. “And now it’s yours. My mother would be happy to see her books in the hands of someone who clearly loves them.” His voice caught on the last word, and Beatrice turned to him.

“Thank you, my lord,” Beatrice said, offering a smile.

“Alexander,” he reminded her.

Beatrice swallowed.

She was his wife.

She would have to get used to calling him by his name.

“Thank you, Alexander,” she said, putting emphasis on the word.

When she said it, his eyes lit up in a way she hadn’t yet seen. “Thank you,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “No one has called me by my name since my parents died. It feels good to hear it again.”

Beatrice stared at him, the weight of what he had just said crashing over her. “Nobody….” she began, her voice trailing off. “How many years?”

His jaw clenched. “Too many. It wasn’t proper for Jenkins or anyone here, and my friends always called me Dunham.”

Beatrice couldn’t imagine. Even without her parents, she’d had Dietrich and his mother, Thea, Sophia, and many others who cared for her.

No wonder he was so disinclined to smile.

He needed someone to love him, and who better to do that than his wife?

Feeling a surge of boldness, she reached for his shirt, stood up on her tiptoes, and planted a kiss on his cheek.

His palms came to rest on her waist, holding her loosely, like he was afraid he might break her if he held her with the full strength of his hands. Alexander closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers, taking a deep breath.

“I’m sorry you were so alone,” she said quietly, looking up at him.

At her words, he released her and took a step back, opening his eyes and clearing his throat. “All is well,” he said, shaking his head as if to dismiss the moment. “I am just glad to hear my name again.”

He would soon become sick of hearing it, because she was going to use it as often as she could.

No one should ever be so alone that they didn’t hear their own name.

And now, he no longer was.

Chapter Ten

Alexander

ALEXANDER WAS IN HIS study, trying to apply himself to paperwork and pretending that he hadn't let himself be vulnerable with his wife when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called, and Guinevere walked in and closed the door behind her.

He raised his eyebrow. “May I help you?” he asked.

“I hope so.” She stepped forward and made her way to the front of his desk. “I have a rather impertinent question, my lord, and I’m hoping that you will help me with it.”

Alexander’s eyebrow couldn’t get any higher. He waited for her to begin.

“Do you know what caused the fire?” she asked.

Alexander didn’t say anything. When he continued to remain silent, Guinevere nodded. “I see. And do you by any chance know of a magic spell that prevents people from saying things?” she asked.

Alexander’s heart began to beat faster.

Guinevere knew about the spell.

He didn’t say anything, merely leaned back in his chair.

Guinevere let out a huff. “And one more question, my lord: are you deceiving your wife as to the reason why you needed a hasty marriage? If you’ll forgive my impertinence.”

Alexander frowned at her but still didn’t say anything.

“Well,” Guinevere said, “I was afraid of that.” She frowned back at him before adding, “You are still capable of speech, right? You haven’t gone mute?”

Alexander shook his head. “I have not gone mute,” he said.

The fact that she had so quickly realized something was amiss was both concerning and heartening. Perhaps she would be able to help his wife

figure out what had happened. “I don’t suppose you are able to give me any other details?” Guinevere asked.

He shook his head.

Guinevere sighed. “You know, I’m not a miracle worker,” she said. “Plants are one thing, but secrets and curses are another thing entirely.”

Alexander shook his head. “What do you mean, ‘plants are one thing?’” he asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “Surely you’ve noticed that the plants in your gardens and greenhouse are always far better off than they should be,” she said. “Even the best gardeners should not be able to keep roses in bloom for this long.”

Alexander thought back to the day he had found Rose under the bush. “I assumed that it was a dragon,” he said offhandedly.

Guinevere’s eyes widened. “You’ve seen a dragon?” she asked.

Rose appeared from underneath his desk and let out a meow. Guinevere narrowed her eyes at the kitten. “And just where do you think you’re going with that attitude?” she said, addressing Rose.

Alexander didn’t know what to say to that. “You can understand her?”

“Of course I can,” Guinevere said. “It’s one of my specialties. Although they don’t usually speak quite so plainly, which leads me to assume that this is not, in fact, an ordinary kitten.”

Alexander watched as Rose transformed from her kitten self to the young dragon that she really was.

Guinevere’s eyes widened. “I was not expecting that one,” she admitted, staring down at the dragon. “Hello,” she said, bowing slightly to the young dragon. “I am Guinevere.”

Rose let out a series of chirps and squawks that sounded far more like a chicken than the kitten noises she usually made. “You can really understand her?” Alexander asked, looking between Guinevere and his pet.

“Of course,” Guinevere said. “She’s telling me how you found her under the rose bushes, which would make sense if you assumed that the roses were the result of a dragon. She may have helped, but no, the roses are my handiwork.”

Rose let out a puff of air and turned her back on them, making her way to a patch of sunlight on the floor and curling up in it.

Alexander took a deep breath. “I don’t suppose you know anything about —?”

His mouth closed of its own accord, and he sighed.

Guinevere shook her head.

“No,” she said, “I don’t know anything about curses, and even if I did, I have a feeling that the one you’re under is far above my talents anyway. I’m not good with magic.”

Any hope that had been beginning to stir in his chest disappeared. “But you said—”

Guinevere shook her head. “I am only good with plants and animals. All the tinctures that your healer uses come from me,” she said proudly. “And they do a fine job, but they will not work on a silencing curse without me doing some incredibly difficult work.”

“Can you do it?” Alexander asked, the words pouring out in a pleading tone before he could stop them. “Please.”

Guinevere bit her lip. “Is there a time limit?” she asked.

Alexander nodded. He couldn’t force the words out.

Guinevere sighed. “A year?” she asked hopefully.

Alexander shook his head.

“Less than that?” she asked in a glum voice.

Alexander nodded.

She grimaced. “Six months?” she asked.

He shook his head and pointed down. “Three months?” she asked.

It was Alexander’s turn to grimace as he continued to point down.

“Two months? A month? Three weeks? Two weeks? A week?” Guinevere’s voice rose incredulously when he finally nodded. ‘You want me to figure out how to break a curse in a week?”

“Less,” Alexander said miserably.

Guinevere frowned. “Your birthday?” she asked, her tone suggesting that she’d given up expecting anything other than the worst news.

Alexander nodded, and Guinevere took a deep breath. “I can’t promise anything,” she warned.

“Anything would be better than nothing,” Alexander managed before the words caught in his throat.

“How bad is it?” Guinevere asked.

“Bad,” he admitted.

“And I’m going to assume that your need for a wife had something to do with that?” she asked.

Alexander nodded his head, the movement triggering the lump in his throat.

Guinevere took a deep breath. “And she knows nothing?”

“Unfortunately,” Alexander said.

The maid took another deep breath, and her fingers began drumming the surface of his desk. “Pen and paper?” she asked.

After a moment of rummaging, Alexander pulled out a pencil and a notebook, ripping out a sheet of paper for her.

“You know, I can't promise anything,” she warned.

“You already said that,” Alexander said.

“And you know that she needs to know,” Guinevere said.

Alexander nodded.

“But you can't tell her,” Guinevere guessed when he didn't say anything.

Alexander shook his head.

“And you can't tell me anything,” she added. After a moment, he shook his head again.

“Stupid magic,” Guinevere muttered under her breath as she began scribbling things on the paper that he'd given her. “You don't have any books on magic in the library, do you? My grandfather taught me what little he knew, but it’s been years since he passed, and I don’t know anything about curses.”

Alexander thought about it for a moment. “Probably not,” he said. “But you never know. After it was outlawed, I think most of the books were destroyed.”

Guinevere pursed her lips. “I'll have to see if I can find anything,” she said. “But again, I can't…”

“Promise anything. I know,” he supplied for her before she could finish her sentence. “But like I said, anything is better than nothing.”

Guinevere nodded. “I imagine so. Do you wish me to say anything to her?” she asked. “I think she should know.”

He shook his head. “Give yourself a day or two first,” he said. “If you are able to find something that will help, then there's no need to worry her.”

“Is she in danger?” Guinevere asked quietly.

The words stuck in Alexander's throat. How could he admit that he had chosen selfishly and put another human being in danger without her

knowledge or consent? What had seemed like such a good plan a few days ago suddenly seemed like the worst plan ever.

His silence seemed to be answer enough, because Guinevere simply sighed.

“I will give you a day,” she said quietly, “but she deserves to know.” Guinevere made her way to the door, then paused and turned back to him. “I am going to trust that you had a reason, but I hope the deception will be worth it.”

She slipped out the door, and Alexander stared down at the tiny dragon basking in the sunlight in the corner of the room. “You revealed yourself,” he said, his tone almost accusing. “Like her, huh?”

The dragon purred, and the sound of satisfaction coming from an animal other than a cat was so comical that Alexander couldn't help a small smile. But it quickly vanished as he thought back to the dilemma at hand. “What am I going to do?” he asked Rose. “She needs to know, but I can't tell her, and Guinevere doesn't know anything else yet.”

The dragon simply continued to purr, her tiny green snout twitching.

Alexander sighed. “You're no help,” he said.

Rose opened one eye long enough to stare at him as if to say, *what did you expect?* before closing it again.

If the fact that he was cursed wasn't enough to drive a man crazy, the fact that he was reduced to talking to a dragon might just be enough to send him over the edge.

But then the door opened again, and his wife slipped through the doorway.

She looked up at him and smiled, but her gaze was drawn to the corner of the room where Rose sat still in her dragon form. “What's that?” Beatrice asked, her eyes wide.

“I…um…it’s a dragon,” Alexander said, with what he hoped was a winning smile. “Meet Rose.”

Rose opened her eyes and instead of simply ignoring Beatrice, decided to stand up and scurry over to her. Beatrice knelt down and reached her hand out to pet the dragon with wonder on her face. “You have a dragon?” she said quietly. “Who knows about this?”

“Almost no one,” Alexander said.

“Does Jenkins know?” Beatrice asked. “He didn't tell me.”

“Jenkins doesn’t know about her,” he admitted. “He thinks she's just a kitten.”

“Wait, she’s the kitten?” Beatrice asked, laughing as she looked down at the little green dragon. “You’ve got everyone fooled, don’t you, little one?”

Beatrice sank down into a seat, and the dragon immediately climbed into her lap, settling in with a decidedly catlike purr.

“She purrs?” Beatrice said in a high-pitched squeal.

“Yes, she purrs,” Alexander said, with a sigh.

“She's perfect, Alexander,” Beatrice said, looking down at Rose, and Alexander couldn't help the smile on his face. There was something about the way Beatrice was so excited about his secret pet that made it impossible not to smile.

If only she would be so excited for his other secret. But she wouldn't be. No sane person would find themself excited to be involved with a curse. And the fact that he had to find a way to tell her dampened his mood.

But he would wait for tomorrow and pray that Guinevere would be able to find something first.

If anyone could help him break his curse, surely it would be the girl who had admitted to using magic under his nose. Perhaps she assumed that since Alexander was under a curse, he wouldn’t turn her in to the king for using magic, and she would be correct.

Perhaps she was exactly the person he'd needed to break the spell, and he would never have to break the news to his wife. Perhaps he could always keep the smile on Beatrice's face. It was a lovely smile.

He made his way over to his wife and knelt next to her to show her how Rose liked to be scratched under the chin. Her delighted gasp made his whole day better.

He’d never imagined that marrying the librarian would be the best thing he’d ever done, but he couldn’t imagine life without her now.

Chapter Eleven

Beatrice

BEATRICE SPENT THE REST of the day happily ensconced in her new library, a purring dragon on her lap and a book in her hands.

She could hardly believe that it belonged to her, that this was her new home, that she was now Lady Dunham. But she wasn't going to question it at the moment—not when she had a room full of hundreds, if not thousands, of books to explore.

It was dinnertime before Guinevere came and fetched her, and she reluctantly left the room to join Alexander for the meal. But she hurried back to the library as soon as the meal was over, curling up in the large chair in the corner—perfectly situated for tearing into a good book—and picking up the romance novel she'd found.

Maybe her first choice of a book to read, out of all the options in this huge library, should not have been a romance. But at the same time, she didn’t think anyone else was going to care what she read, and reading a romance made her happy. So why wouldn’t she?

Her life as Lady Dunham was beginning to feel like a fairytale romance of her own, despite how it had begun.

So surely there was no harm in reading a romance novel.

It wasn’t long before she looked up to find Guinevere smiling at her with an indulgent smile and a candlestick in her hand. The windows were no longer letting in much light, and she had been reading in near darkness for far too long.

“Hello,” she said to the maid with an unrepentant grin.

Guinevere simply laughed. “You ought to come to bed, my lady,” she said.

“I will in a moment,” Beatrice promised. “I have to see how this chapter ends.”

Guinevere left the room, leaving the candlestick, and Beatrice returned to the world she had been enjoying. The chapter ended all too soon, and it was tempting to keep reading, but the flickering candles gave barely enough light, even when combined with the last traces of sunshine coming through the window.

Perhaps she could finish her chapter in bed—that sounded even cozier than the library. And then if Guinevere was still waiting for her, she could help Beatrice undress and go to sleep herself.

She lifted the purring dragon out of her lap and set her back down in the chair with a gentle pat, laughing when Rose let out a disgruntled chirp.

She tucked her book under her elbow and picked up the candlestick, making her way toward the staircase and creeping up it as quietly as she could.

It was odd, being the only one out and about.

The silence in the house was broken only by her quiet footsteps and the slightly louder steps of the tiny dragon stomping behind her. Rose had apparently decided she preferred company over the solitude of the library.

“Shhh,” she whispered to Rose, who merely chirped and continued to tromp up the stairs.

Beatrice sighed as she reached the top and waited for Rose to catch up to her. She should have assumed the dragon wouldn’t listen to her. But she had to admit that the idea of Rose curling into bed with her was appealing.

She should have asked Alexander if the tiny dragon could shoot flames from her mouth, or if that part was simply a legend.

Although, the dragon herself wasn’t a legend…so maybe she shouldn’t let Rose sleep on her bed.

She walked quietly toward her room, glancing at Alexander’s door, and the corners of her mouth turned up into a smile when she remembered his reaction earlier when she said his name for the first time. She couldn’t believe it had been so many years since he’d had someone call him by his name.

But that was going to change.

She crept into her room, Rose following closely behind her, and closed the door quietly. She set down the candlestick with its three candles on the

boudoir table and stared at herself in the mirror, grimacing. Her hair was still up in its intricate style, and she wasn't sure she could get out of her dress on her own.

Maybe she should have gone to bed earlier.

There was a chirping and Beatrice looked over to find Rose making herself comfortable on the pillow next to hers.

"Don't light my bed on fire," Beatrice whispered, pointing at the dragon.

She began poking at her hair and found a few pins in short order, but when she pulled them out, it wasn't enough to make the rest of the hair fall.

There was a noise in the corridor and the door opened with a gentle snick before Guinevere slipped through and smiled at her.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're here," Beatrice said in relief.

The maid hurried up behind her and began deftly combing her fingers through Beatrice's rumpled hair.

"I tried," Beatrice said, giving Guinevere a sheepish look in the mirror.

"Did you?" Guinevere asked with a teasing grin. "It seems to me you just made a mess."

Beatrice laughed. "I'm sorry. I'm no match for the amazing work you did, and I'll be honest, I wasn't sure if I would be able to manage getting out of this dress without you."

Guinevere's grin widened. "I know. That's why I didn't go to bed."

"Thank you," Beatrice said with a deep breath. "I had no idea how much of being a lady I couldn't do on my own. I need help."

"That's why I'm here," Guinevere said, picking up the comb and working her way through Beatrice's long hair. "Did you get to finish your chapter?"

Beatrice grinned and reached for the book on the table. "I only have two chapters left," she said. "I thought I might finish it in bed, so that if you were still awake, you could go to sleep."

"Thank you," Guinevere said, "but you needn't have worried on my behalf."

"Just because I needn't doesn't mean I won't," Beatrice said. "I may be the new Lady Dunham, but I don't know how to be nobility, remember?"

The two girls shared a laugh, and Beatrice looked over at the door that connected her room to Alexander's.

How her life had changed in only two days. She had gone from being a commoner employed by Lord Alexander to becoming his wife in such a short time, living in his home…which was now their home.

And speaking of their home…"What do you know about the fire?" she asked.

"I'll confess I don't know much about it—it was over fifteen years ago," Guinevere said. "I was still a child when it happened, but I remember there was no official ruling on how the fire started. There was a rumor that it must have been started by magic, because there was no other explanation found, and it killed both of his parents."

"I remember that," Beatrice said solemnly, turning to glance at Alexander's door again.

Guinevere nodded. "Lord Alexander lost his parents and became Lord Dunham far too young. It was quite a shock for everyone, but he has done an incredible job."

"I'm sure he has," Beatrice said.

She knew that much of him—he was a good man with good intentions who always did the best he could. She'd known that before she married him, when he was simply her employer, despite the rumors in town. But in living with him for only two days, she had seen it even more.

He might have an uncaring demeanor, but he truly did care.

She'd seen that with the tenants, the way he treated Guinevere, and the way he treated his tiny dragon. Beatrice could hardly contain her grin at the thought. He had a dragon and nobody knew, except for the two of them.

"And what are you smiling about?" Guinevere asked with an impish grin, glancing over at Alexander's door herself.

Beatrice shook her head. "No," she said. "Not that."

Her maid raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?" she asked. "You wouldn't be the first wife to fall in love with her husband."

Beatrice huffed. "I've barely known him for more than two days. I am not falling in love with him simply because he picked me up when I fell."

"You fell? Where?"

"On the stairs. Today's dress was a tad too long, and I tripped on the hem as I was walking down the last step. Alexander heard me fall and came to my rescue."

"Were you hurt?" Guinevere asked, putting down the comb.

“No,” Beatrice shook her head. “Simply embarrassed, but he was very kind about it.”

Guinevere began unlacing the back of Beatrice’s dress. “I shall see to getting the hems shortened,” she said. “I may need to do a fitting so we can make sure they fit properly, perhaps tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Beatrice said. “Whatever you need from me.”

“You may be the most easygoing lady I’ve ever met,” Guinevere said, the corners of her eye crinkling.

“And I suppose you’ve met many of them?” Beatrice asked.

Guinevere laughed. “No, not many, unless you count Lady Sophia.”

Beatrice grinned at the thought. Her friend Sophia had found out the truth of her own past only a few months ago, and she was now Lady Sophia Manning.

She’d thought that perhaps she would lose her friend now that she was nobility, but it seemed they had more in common than before.

“I must write to Sophia,” Beatrice said. “I’ve been so preoccupied I’ve forgotten. I’m sure she’ll have advice for me. Oh, how I wish I could go see everyone.”

“I’m sure we can arrange that,” Guinevere said.

Beatrice nodded. “Soon, I hope.”

She had missed visiting Thea this morning, even if it hadn’t been that long since she’d seen her. And if she didn’t see Dietrich before too long, he would never let her live it down that he was in town more than she was.

Although now that she was Lady Dunham, he would probably be in town much more than she was. At least until the Duke came back to the Northlands, and Dietrich had to pay attention to his job again.

“Thank you for your help,” Beatrice said, as Guinevere finished unlacing the dress and took a step back. “I think I can manage the rest.”

“Your nightgown is on your bed,” Guinevere said, with a smile and a short curtsy. “I will take my leave now, unless you need anything else.”

Beatrice smiled and shook her head. “No, thank you. Have a good night’s sleep.”

Guinevere disappeared, and Beatrice quickly put on her nightgown and brought the candlestick to the table beside her bed, where a glass of water sat waiting for her next to a rose in a cup of its own.

She smiled at the thoughtful gesture as she curled into her bed, snuggling under the warm covers and reaching for her book. She was on

the last page when she heard a noise coming from Alexander's room.

She stopped reading and looked up. It sounded almost as if he was having a nightmare. The sound of thrashing and his voice only grew louder, and Beatrice crept from her bed and stood near the adjoining door to listen.

She pressed her ear up against it and could make out the sound of her husband's voice saying, "No, you can't. I won't let you. I—"

He sounded like he was in pain, the words hoarse and raw. Beatrice's hand reached for the doorknob of its own volition, and she stopped herself before opening the door.

She shouldn't go in there. She had no right to go into a man's bedroom…but he was her husband, so maybe she did. And if she could wake him from his nightmare, then perhaps she should.

It couldn't hurt to try, right?

But maybe it could. What if he was upset that she entered his room?

She reached for the doorknob again as Alexander continued to cry out. When the words turned to "please, don't," and his voice sounded broken, it was enough to make up her mind.

She opened the door and stepped into her husband's room. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness without a candle, and she could make out his bed—a large four-poster bed that matched her own—on the far side of the room, where Alexander was tossing and turning.

If only she had grabbed the candlestick.

But if she turned back now, she wouldn't have the courage to continue. So she pressed forward, making her way to the edge of his bed. He stopped thrashing, and she almost turned and left, but then he growled, "You may have cast a curse of silence upon me, but I will not let you destroy my life or hurt my wife."

She froze, her hand poised to reach out and touch his arm. What? A silencing curse? Did those exist?

Her mind flashed back to Guinevere's mention of a magical fire. Perhaps magic still existed—perhaps making it illegal hadn't driven it out of Galamere entirely—and perhaps her husband might actually be cursed.

"No," Alexander shouted, thrashing wildly again, and Beatrice lunged forward, grabbing his arm. He stilled at her touch, and she was able to bring it down across his chest, but when she let go, he started thrashing again.

Beatrice sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, reaching for his arm and holding it gently.

"Alexander," she said softly. "I—"

He didn't wake, but his features eased, and her heart broke for the young man who had lost everything all those years ago.

"Can you hear me?" she asked quietly. "I don't know if you're simply having a nightmare, or if you are, in fact, under a curse, but I'm here, and whatever it is, you are not alone. You will never have to be alone again."

He seemed to slip into a deeper slumber at her words. Could he hear her, or was he truly asleep? Beatrice was not sure, but when she let go of his arm and stood, he began to tremble.

If he was indeed cursed, it was possible this was a magical nightmare that he couldn't be woken from.

"Alexander," she said, her voice louder. When that did nothing, she grasped his shoulder and shook it firmly. "Wake up, Alexander."

Still nothing.

She didn't know anything about magic, but there was an entire library of books downstairs—something in there had to have something to do with magic.

She would start looking first thing in the morning.

But what to do now?

She let go, and the trembling started again.

She couldn't leave him like this.

Beatrice sighed and considered the large space of bed beside him. It would be quite improper for her to sleep here.

Except that they were, in fact, married, so it wouldn't be.

And she was tired, her eyes burning after staying up late reading.

And if her presence meant he could sleep in peace, she would be hesitant to leave him, especially when she had just told him that he would never have to be alone again.

But what would he do if he woke up and found her in his bed?

The edge of the bed was uncomfortable to perch on, so Beatrice made up her mind and crossed over to the other side of the bed, sitting next to him and propping a pillow up behind her. She wouldn't lie down, but she would sit with him for a little longer and see if the nightmare passed. Then she would go back to her room. Surely she could stay awake long enough to do that.

Chapter Twelve

Alexander

SUNLIGHT BEGAN TO DRIFT through the curtains and Alexander's eyes opened, squinting as he looked out the window.

Something told him it was going to snow later, but the sky was currently blue, so maybe he was wrong. Even if he usually wasn't.

He began to stir, and something fell off his arm. He glanced over, expecting to see Rose perched next to him, but his eyes widened when he saw his wife sitting in his bed.

Beatrice was propped up against a pillow, sound asleep, her hand resting on the blanket next to his arm.

When had she come into his room, and why was she sitting in his bed touching his arm?

He rolled onto his side and took a moment to study her features without her noticing: the few freckles that dusted her cheeks, her tiny nose, her lips, and the way her hair trailed down across her chest.

He had occasionally imagined being married, but he’d never imagined that his wife would be this beautiful, nor that he would already feel so strongly about protecting her from all harm.

It was merely a marriage of convenience—and yet his feelings couldn’t be less convenient.

He shifted as his arm began protesting the weight upon it, and her eyes fluttered open. She looked at him for half a second before they widened dramatically. She pulled her arm back and crossed it over her chest, leaning away from him.

“Forgive me, Alexander,” she began, looking away from him.

“Do not worry,” Alexander said, wanting to ease her mind. She looked like a frightened rabbit that had been caught in a trap. But even while anxious, she’d said his name, and warmth flooded his soul at the thought.

“I’m not upset, merely curious as to why you are asleep sitting upright in my bed. But you don’t need to fear. We are married, after all.” He let his

voice take on a teasing tone with the last words, something that didn't come naturally to him, but was worth it when she uncrossed her arms and began to fidget with her nightgown instead. “Are you not cold?” he asked. The fire had died down overnight, and she was not covered by any of the blankets.

“It's not too bad,” Beatrice said, still avoiding meeting his gaze.

It would not do for his wife to be cold. Alexander swung his feet over the side of the bed and walked to the armoire. He returned after a moment with a blanket for her, spreading it over her legs before climbing back into his bed and pulling the covers over himself again.

If Beatrice noticed that he was not wearing a shirt, she didn't say anything, but the color of her cheeks confirmed that she had, most likely, noticed.

Either that, or she was more embarrassed than he thought about being caught in his bedchamber.

“Were you having trouble sleeping?” Alexander asked. “You could have woken me.”

Beatrice frowned at him. “You don't remember?” she asked. But then she shook her head. “No, you wouldn't. I couldn't wake you. So why would you remember?”

“You couldn't wake me?” he asked.

“You were having a nightmare,” she explained, reaching up and playing with the ends of her hair. Her fingers twisted and tangled in the reddish-brown waves, and he wanted to reach out and see if her hair felt as silky smooth as it looked.

He folded his hands in his lap instead.

“You said some things in your nightmare,” Beatrice began slowly. “I don't know if it was just a nightmare or if it was a memory.” The words came out in halting half-sentences, as if she was questioning her own memory of the incident.

“What happened?” he asked gently, reaching out his hand in a silent offer.

She stared down at it for a moment before slowly, so slowly, reaching out her own and placing it in his. Her fingers were ice-cold, and Alexander immediately reached over and adjusted the blanket, tucking it more securely around her with his free hand. “You're cold,” he said.

“Yes,” she admitted softly.

The movement of tucking the blanket in had brought him closer to her, their faces mere inches apart. This close, he could see that her eyes were not nearly the color he had imagined. They were a rich brown, the color of freshly poured coffee, deep and bright, promising to make his day better from the very start.

They already had.

Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, and his gaze flickered down to them and back up to her eyes.

He cleared his throat and settled back against his pillow, his shoulder brushing against hers.

This was dangerous.

Something shifted on the end of the bed, and both of them looked up to see Rose in her kitten form, stretching widely across the bed. She looked up and noticed them staring at her before sauntering over and curling up in Beatrice’s lap.

His wife pulled her hand away from his to pet her, and a moment later the purring started.

“I would love to hear more,” he said, looking back at Beatrice, “if you are willing to share.”

His wife glanced over at him.

“Whatever it is,” he encouraged her.

Beatrice took a deep breath. “It sounded in your nightmare as if you were under a silencing curse.”

The words came out in a rush, as if she was afraid of his reaction, and Alexander's heart stopped beating for a moment.

In all his deliberation on how to tell her, he had never considered that she would hear it directly from him in a dream.

Apparently, the curse could be circumvented in specific situations.

“Is it true?” Beatrice asked.

He looked down at her, her eyes full of vulnerability, and said nothing but silently nodded.

Her eyes searched his, as if she could peer into his soul.

How could a woman who had barely known him for longer than three days see through him so clearly? Yes, she’d been his employee, but they’d had more contact in the past three days than the previous two years doubled.

“It's real,” she said.

Alexander nodded. He couldn't say it, but he could confirm it.

Beatrice looked away from him. Her gaze settled on some unseeing point far, far away. “Why?” she asked, her attention snapping back to him.

Alexander said nothing. He couldn't talk about that part either.

“Is that why you had to marry me?” she asked. “Am I part of it?”

Alexander tried. What words could he say that wouldn't be stopped by the curse? He opened his mouth to begin, but his tongue stopped working before he could say something about him marrying someone else.

“It's not you specifically,” he finally managed to get out.

“Is it stopping you from speaking?” she asked.

“You could say that,” he said, surprised that the words came out.

Beatrice frowned. “Is it dangerous?”

Alexander shrugged.

“Does anyone else know?” she asked.

“Guinevere discovered it yesterday.”

Her eyes widened. “And she didn't tell me?”

“I asked her to wait until today,” Alexander admitted. “I was hoping to find some way to tell you myself. I didn't expect it to be in the middle of the night, but I was completely unaware of that.”

Beatrice grinned. “Well, I always was too nosy for my own good.”

Alexander let out a laugh. “I think that you and your nosiness is the best thing that could have happened to me.”

His wife froze, staring up at him, suddenly looking as if she might cry. “The best thing?” she asked, her voice breaking.

“Yes,” he said, nodding at her. “I think so. At least, the best thing in a very, very long time.”

Beatrice sniffed. “No one's ever told me that before,” she said.

“No one's ever told you what?” he asked, frowning at her. “That you're the best thing that's happened to them?”

She shook her head.

“Not even your father?” he asked, even though he already knew the answer. He was beginning to hate the man. Why had he been given a daughter like Beatrice? He didn’t deserve her in the least.

She shook her head once more.

“I am sorry you’ve never heard it before,” he said, “because you deserve to hear it every day. I know we haven't known each other long, but I can

already tell that you are perfect for me, and I can't wait to watch us grow together.”

The words felt foreign in his mouth, even as they felt so right. He'd never said something like that to anyone before, and yet they felt absolutely true. He knew without a doubt that Beatrice Montgomery—or Beatrice Dunham—was going to be a big part of his life, and he could only hope that they would get to live together for a long time.

He'd never really thought about living a long life with his wife before, probably a side effect of his parents dying well before their time. He couldn't wait to see what that could look like. And he couldn't wait to see it with Beatrice—assuming, of course, the sorcerer didn’t come back and try to kill them both.

“Unless, of course, you're scared and plan to leave me,” he said. He said the words jokingly, but deep down, he wondered if she would take him up on it. It wasn’t every day you discovered that your husband was cursed.

“Of course not,” Beatrice said, looking at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted a second head. “I am your wife, and I plan on sticking with you for the rest of our lives. You can't get rid of me that easily. If it was that easy, I would have left my father behind years ago.” The last words were muttered and seemed more for her benefit than his.

He raised an eyebrow at her, but she didn't seem inclined to give more information, and he didn’t want to push the matter, so he didn’t ask.

“I’m your wife,” she said firmly, coming out of her thoughts, “and whatever happens, we will see it through together.” She reached for his hand and squeezed it before letting go quickly, almost as if she was afraid of his reaction.

He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. “Thank you,” he said, the words sticking in his throat for a reason other than a curse. “I never could have imagined that I'd find someone like you.”

“I suspect you never imagined you would be hit with a silencing curse, either,” she pointed out. “I still have to figure out why you were cursed and who cursed you, and how long I have before things could be dangerous.”

He didn't say anything. He knew better than to even try. The fact that he'd managed to say this much was a bit of a miracle.

“I don't suppose you can tell me how long we have,” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Can I guess?” she asked.

“Maybe,” he said.

Beatrice frowned. “A year?”

“No.”

“More or less?” she asked.

“Less,” Alexander said.

Having just been through this with Guinevere yesterday, he wasn't surprised when it took several guesses to get even remotely close.

“Less than a week,” she finally said, and he nodded.

She thought for a moment, looking down at Rose and stroking her back before she looked up at him with her mouth wide open. “It’s your birthday.”

It shouldn’t surprise him that she’d figured it out so quickly. One of the reasons he had chosen her to be his bride was because she was smart—she’d proved it over and over again. But still, the fact that someone had figured out that he was cursed and so quickly narrowed it down to the day of reckoning was shocking.

Beatrice took a deep breath. “Well, I suppose there's only one thing to do. I wish you had told me yesterday so I didn't waste time on something as frivolous as reading a romance novel when I might need to save your life,” she teased. “But now that I know, I shall get to work straightaway.”

“Doing what?” he asked.

His wife raised an eyebrow at him. “Doing what you paid me to do,” she said. “I'm a librarian. We read.”

Chapter Thirteen

Beatrice

BY THE TIME GUINEVERE arrived in Beatrice's bedchamber, Beatrice had returned from Alexander's room and was sitting at her boudoir table, waiting for her.

“Good morning, Guinevere,” Beatrice said cheerfully as Guinevere walked in.

“How can I help you this morning, my lady?” Guinevere asked, standing behind her and reaching for the comb.

Beatrice met her eyes in the mirror. “You can tell me what sort of curse you think my husband has gotten tangled up in.”

Guinevere froze. “He told you?”

Beatrice shook her head. “You know he can't, but I figured enough of it out when I overheard him having a nightmare last night. He was talking in his sleep.”

Guinevere’s eyes widened. “He can talk about it in his sleep? That means the curse probably had something to do with not telling anyone else and isn’t specifically about stopping the words. I wonder if he can tell the cat.”

Beatrice grinned at the thought of Alexander baring his soul to Rose the dragon. “I don't know,” she said. “Maybe he’s tried it, but I don't know what the result was.”

“So what do you know about it?” Guinevere asked as she began working the comb through Beatrice's hair.

“Not much,” Beatrice admitted. “I know that he is under a silencing curse and that we have until his birthday to prepare for whatever is going to happen that he can’t talk about. I just can't believe he’s under a curse. I didn’t think curses were real.”

“There are many things that most people in Galamere don’t think of as real,” Guinevere said.

“Like what?” Beatrice asked suspiciously, narrowing her eyes.

Guinevere shrugged a shoulder. “I wouldn't know.”

Beatrice took a deep breath. There were too many secrets here. “All right, then, keep your secrets, but know that I'm on to you,” she said, “and I will figure it out.”

“I have no doubt,” Guinevere said with a smile. “So now that you know, what do you intend to do about it?”

Beatrice sighed. “I’m not sure. I plan to start in the library as soon as we are done breaking our fast and look for any books that have anything to do with magic.”

“And sorcery,” Guinevere said darkly. “It’s the most likely culprit for a curse.”

As if that wasn’t suspicious. “You seem to know more than you're letting on,” Beatrice said.

Guinevere said nothing.

“Are you under a silencing curse too?” Beatrice asked.

Guinevere shook her head. “No, I just know that magic is illegal in our country.”

Beatrice took a deep breath. “Of course,” she said. “Forgive me, I ought not to pry. But if there is anything you know that will help my husband—”

“Of course,” Guinevere said. “Lord Dunham has done many things for my family and for me, and if there is anything I can do to help him, you can be sure that I will do it.”

“And if there's anything else you think will help me to begin my search in the library—”

“Maybe I will join you in the library,” Guinevere said. “It may be helpful for both of us. And I’m working on something else that I hope may help.”

When Beatrice opened her mouth to inquire, Guinevere shook her head. “No. I am not ready to share what it is yet, because it may come to nothing.”

Beatrice sighed but stopped asking questions as Guinevere helped her get dressed. She made her way down the grand staircase and was relieved that she didn't slip or fall on her face this time, and it only took her a moment to remember the way to the dining room.

She wasn't sure how she would react when she saw Alexander again.

It had been a little awkward when she had to leave his bed to go back to her room. Even though nothing had happened and they were married…it

still made her unsure of what would happen next between them.

It had been so natural to sit next to him and make sure he didn't continue to have nightmares. Every time she'd let go of his arm, he'd started trembling again. So she'd stayed until at last, she had succumbed to sleep after what felt like two or three hours.

But somehow, she couldn't shake the fact that he had talked in his sleep and said things that he probably would never have said had he been awake.

She could not change the horrible things that had happened in his past, but she could help prevent whatever was going to happen next. She just had to figure out how to do that, and if that meant she spent the next five days in a library researching, that was what she would do, because her husband needed her.

She was already sitting at the breakfast table when Alexander walked in. There were hollows under his eyes, but he was immaculately dressed as always, and he appeared completely normal as Jenkins brought in the mail.

Beatrice wasn't sure if she should be flattered or frustrated that he seemed completely unaffected by finding her in his bed this morning.

Perhaps the nightmares hadn't affected him as much as they had seemed, other than making him tired. Maybe they had affected Beatrice more than him.

Or maybe he was pretending it didn't affect him, and he was more rattled than he was letting on. He certainly had enough things to worry about—perhaps finding his wife in his bed didn't even make the first page of his list of concerns.

It only gave her the determination she needed to focus on the task ahead.

"Alexander," Beatrice said, catching his attention from the envelope he was opening, "if I was planning to search for a particular subject in the library, is it organized in any particular manner, or should I just start looking?"

Her husband frowned. "I know my mother had a system," he said, "but she didn't write it down anywhere, as far as I know, and it would be difficult to guess. If you want my help, I could come and help you look for a little while."

Beatrice shook her head. "I'm sure you have other things to do. Guinevere and I can manage it."

"Guinevere is helping you?" he asked.

“Yes,” Beatrice said. “She and I are both interested in discovering a little more about the library.”

With several servants wandering around the dining room as they ate, Beatrice didn’t know what she could say and what she couldn’t, but figured it was probably best to stay vague. Alexander knew what she was talking about, and as far as everyone else was concerned, she was simply being her normal librarian self.

But when she retired to the library with Guinevere after their meal, she had to take a deep breath at the sight of all the books on the shelves. “This is going to take a while,” she said to Guinevere.

The sheer volume of books that had felt like such a gift only last night was suddenly overwhelming. How were they supposed to find a book about magic among the hundreds of books here?

“I know,” Guinevere said with a sigh, “but the good news is there are two of us.”

“You start on that end,” Beatrice said, pointing to the left, “and I’ll start on this end. Perhaps Lady Dunham kept items grouped similarly. Once we find the right section, hopefully, we will find all the books on the topic.”

Guinevere nodded and headed left, and Beatrice went the opposite direction.

She started at the first bookcase, opening each book to read the title and thumb through its pages if she thought it might have anything to do with magic. She would have preferred to read them all, but for now, she contented herself with taking a deep breath of that old book smell.

“Another benefit,” she called to Guinevere, “is that by the end of this, I should know what books we have in the library.”

“I’m surprised you’re not cataloging them,” Guinevere said with a grin. “Isn’t that what librarians do?”

Beatrice sighed. “Yes, it is. And unfortunately, that is a task I should like to accomplish at some point, but we don’t have the time to do it now. So we’ll have to go back through a second time.”

“And I’m sure you will love every moment of it,” Guinevere said.

Beatrice smiled and returned to looking through the books.

If she weren’t searching for something that had completely turned her world upside down in the past twelve hours, she would have enjoyed this task. But the idea that she and her husband were in danger and she knew nothing about it didn't make for a very enjoyable search.

After nearly two hours of work and finding absolutely nothing related to magic, Beatrice grew fatigued. The thought of continuing to sort for another few hours without any progress was discouraging. “I think I might take a walk,” she told Guinevere. “Some time to clear my head would be helpful, and I think I will be better off for it.”

“That sounds like a great decision,” Guinevere said. “I will keep looking, unless you want me to accompany you.”

“No, no,” Beatrice said. “I have some thinking to do about everything that’s happened.”

“That’s understandable,” Guinevere said with a smile. “Would you like help with your cloak?”

“I am capable, but thank you.”

Beatrice left the library and made her way to the front door. She was a little surprised that Jenkins didn’t instantly appear, but he was probably helping Alexander somewhere.

Beatrice opened the wardrobe and reached for her cloak, fastening it around her shoulders before slipping out the front door and setting off to the south, toward town. It was a route she was familiar with, and she knew she could find her way back to the manor, unlike the north, where she had no idea where things were.

She didn’t need to get lost on her first foray out as Lady Dunham.

She made her way toward town slowly, not interested in exerting herself overly, but very interested in thinking through everything that had happened in the past three days.

Had it really only been three days?

How had her life changed so quickly?

She walked for maybe fifteen minutes before the wind began to pick up, and she turned toward the forest to the west, hoping for a little more shelter from the wind.

Dark shadows began to cover the land, and she looked up at the sky. The light cover of clouds that had been there when she left the estate had grown into one massive dark cloud that threatened snow.

The wind picking up had been a warning, and her thoughts had been racing too fast to heed it.

Beatrice turned around and began making her way back to the manor quickly. Could she make it back before the snow started?

She stuck close to the trees, hoping for some protection from the snow as light flakes began to fall.

Until there was a crashing sound in the underbrush, and a dark form that was suspiciously bear-shaped bolted past her.

Her heart beating furiously in her chest, she veered away from the trees.

There was no use in avoiding the snow if she got eaten by a bear.

The snow began to fall faster, and her visibility decreased. Beatrice picked up her pace. If she had been wearing fewer layers, she might have attempted to run. She knew the way back to Eldenwilde, but if the visibility got bad, she didn’t want to miss the estate and get lost.

She had to make it back before the storm got worse.

Chapter Fourteen

Alexander

ALEXANDER STARED OUT THE window, where the snow was coming down harder than it had yet this year, and grimaced. It was going to be a cold night.

Fortunately, he didn't have to go out in it.

He turned back to his papers and frowned at them. He'd undertaken writing a will when he realized he had no idea what the sorcerer was going to do after he refused to marry the man's daughter. The task of allocating all his assets was tedious, and he was tired of it.

There was a rap at the door and Jenkins opened it.

"There is a man to see you, my lord," he said stiffly before a young man in a servant's outfit pushed his way through the door.

"Hello, my lord, I'm here to see Beatrice," he said.

"And who are you?" Alexander asked, frowning at the intrusion.

"I'm Dietrich," he said. "I'm sure Beatrice has told you about me."

Oh, this was Beatrice's friend, the one she'd said was likely to come looking for her if he didn't tell them where she was. "Oh, right," Alexander said. "She did. Jenkins, would you show him to the library? I believe that's where she is."

"She's not there, my lord," Jenkins said. "I was thinking perhaps she was here with you."

A chill ran down Alexander's spine. "What do you mean she's not there?" he asked, standing and pushing his chair back forcefully. "She was there. Where did she go?"

"I don't know," Jenkins said.

Someone cleared their throat behind Jenkins. "I might know," Guinevere said. "She said she wanted to go for a walk to clear her head."

Alexander glanced back outside, and the chill down his spine turned into something worse. "She's out there?" he asked. "And you didn't see her?" he asked Dietrich.

Dietrich, who looked as scared as Alexander felt, said, “No, but I’m going to go look for her.”

“Me too,” Alexander said, hurrying for the foyer with Dietrich.

“There’s no need, my lord,” Dietrich said. “I will find her. You needn’t go out in the storm.”

“As if I’m not going to go look for my wife,” Alexander growled.

“Your wife?” Dietrich asked, his voice harsh.

Alexander grimaced. He had forgotten he’d left that part out of the note he’d sent to town. “She’ll explain when we find her,” he said as he grabbed his coat from Jenkins. “But yes, she’s my wife.”

He looked over at Dietrich. “Is that a problem?”

Had Beatrice had an understanding with this man and neglected to tell him?

Dietrich shook his head. “Not a problem, as long as she’s happy and you don’t hurt her,” he said. “I suggest we find her because if we don’t, I might have to kill you.”

Alexander grinned. If Dietrich was a friend of Beatrice’s, enough of a friend to suggest killing a noble on her behalf, then he would be worth having around to look for her.

“I understand,” he said. “Let’s go find her so she can yell at both of us for going out in the storm.”

Dietrich grinned. “It sounds like you understand Beatrice pretty well,” he said, as the door opened and an icy blast hit them in the face. Before Alexander could say anything, Rose scampered out between his legs into the storm.

“Get back here, Rose!” he growled at her.

“I think she wants to help you look for her,” Guinevere said, her voice carrying a hidden meaning that he wasn’t sure he understood.

But then realization hit him. Rose wanted to use her dragon senses to find Beatrice.

He looked down at the kitten, then over at Dietrich. “You might as well,” he told the kitten. “We’ll take whatever help we can get.”

The kitten chirped and, in the blink of an eye, had transformed into her dragon self.

Dietrich blinked a couple of times, then nodded his head. “I think I like our odds better now,” he said. “Let’s go find her before it gets worse.”

They made their way into the storm, following Rose, who flew on tiny wings with no hesitation or sign of slowing down. They walked quickly—the snow had already passed their ankles and was growing higher with every minute. The two men walked side by side, their arms brushing against each other occasionally, a reminder that the other was there and hadn't been lost to the snowstorm.

All they could do was follow Rose and hope that she could find Beatrice, because he couldn't see more than a few feet in front of them.

They walked in silence aside from an occasional call for Beatrice, the unspoken need to find her, and fast, taking over their every step. Alexander's heart was filled with fear at the thought of losing her.

It felt odd to feel so strongly about her. He had only known her for a couple of years and had only been married to her for three days. It shouldn't make his heart stop beating to think about the fact that hers might have already stopped.

He shook his head to himself—he couldn't think like that.

She had to be alive.

They trudged through the storm for what seemed like an hour before the dragon started making new noises and zoomed ahead at a speed so fast, there was no way they could keep up. They began running anyway. Hopefully they were staying in a straight line and not getting lost in the storm themselves.

Wouldn't that be a story for everyone if, in trying to find Beatrice, they ended up frozen themselves?

But then through the storm, he could see a dark shape wrestling its way through the snow in slow but steady steps.

It had to be her.

Alexander somehow forced himself to run even faster, and when he was close enough to recognize his wife's face through the blowing snow, her blue lips and pale face signaling just how cold she was, he opened his arms wide, and she stumbled into them, collapsing against his chest.

"You came for me," she muttered into his chest.

"Of course I did," he said, wrapping his arms around her so tightly he worried he might break her, as if she were a frozen icicle that might snap in two at the slightest breath.

"I can't believe it," she said through chattering teeth. "But how did you find me?"

“Your husband’s dragon found you,” a dry voice said, and Beatrice gasped and lunged out of his arms.

“Dietrich!” she cried, throwing herself at the other man, and Alexander had to fight the urge to throttle him. “Why are you here?” she asked, letting go of him.

“Walk and talk, my girl,” he said, wrapping an arm around her waist and turning himself around. “Let’s get you back.”

Beatrice slipped out of Dietrich’s grasp and turned to Alexander, which gave Alexander an immense amount of satisfaction. She closed the distance between them and walked by his side as they followed Rose toward home.

“I thought the girls of the Northlands were done needing me to rescue them from snowstorms,” Dietrich quipped.

“Technically, Sophia wasn’t from the Northlands,” Beatrice pointed out. “And I was on my way home.”

“Oh, so it’s home now?” Dietrich asked. Alexander could hear the question in his voice.

“It is,” Beatrice said, and Alexander couldn’t help the grin that swept across his face. Eldenwilde was her home now. Her home was with him. It was a simple declaration, and yet it meant everything. He tucked her into his side, pulling her close and wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

It was purely for warmth, not at all because he wanted her closer.

“And when were you going to inform us of this fact?” Dietrich asked. “It’s not every day a man learns that his little sister is now a lady.”

“Did Thea not tell you?” Beatrice asked.

“No, she did not,” Dietrich said dryly. “She told me that you were at Eldenwilde and had been for three days. One would think you would send me a note telling me directly.”

Yes, it was surprising that she would message Thea but not her own brother.

But no, that didn’t make sense. When he’d hired her, she had told him her only family was her father.

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” he said to her.

Rose began chirping up ahead, and Beatrice chuckled through chattering teeth. “I think she’s telling me that she knows he’s not my brother,” she said. “When my mother left, Dietrich’s mother Danise became like my

own, and Dietrich became a brother to me. My father didn't know how to raise a little girl, so I spent most of my time with them."

It made more sense when she put it that way. "Yeah, we're not blood-related, but she's the only one who gets away with treating me the way she does," Dietrich teased, his voice barely loud enough to be heard through the whistling wind.

Alexander was glad to hear that she hadn't lied to him, but he was even more glad to hear that she thought of Dietrich as a brother. Although the fact that Dietrich now knew they had a dragon could pose some problems. He'd just have to make sure the man knew to keep quiet about it.

Magic was illegal, and while dragons weren't technically…they hadn't been seen since magic was legal in Galamere. He had no reason to share Rose's existence when she tended to keep herself in her kitten form, even if she was currently leading their way back home in flight.

The rest of the walk back to Eldenwilde was spent in silence, though Alexander kept looking down to check on his wife. At one point, she looked up at him, and even though she looked as if she was about to freeze solid, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He didn't want to admit it, but he was falling for Beatrice. What was he supposed to do with that information?

The lights of home shone bright through the snow. When they reached the front steps, Rose transformed into her kitten form, fluffing out her coat.

"Thank you, Rose," Beatrice said, leaning down to pet her and stumbling over a step.

Alexander's grip on her shoulder tightened and he kept her from falling flat on her face. "We can thank her later," he insisted, guiding his wife up the final stairs toward the door.

The moment they walked through the door, Jenkins was waiting with a pile of blankets and immediately sent a maid for hot tea.

Dietrich and Rose hung back as Alexander undid his wife's wet cloak, then swooped her up into his arms and carried her into his study, where the hottest fire he'd ever seen blazed in the fireplace. She let out a surprised whoop, throwing her arms around his neck, and he grinned down at her.

He hadn't realized how fun it could be to pick up one's wife, but he suddenly wanted to do it more often.

The tension of the search began to melt along with the snow currently coating his hair, sending cold drops sliding down his neck.

She was safe.

Jenkins hurried into the study after them with the blankets, followed by Mrs. Jenkins, as he placed Beatrice in the chair that had been pulled up next to the roaring fire.

“You all needn’t make such a fuss,” Beatrice said, and there was a chorus of voices instantly informing her that they had every right to make a fuss and she should not have gone out in the storm. “I didn’t know there was going to be a storm,” Beatrice protested. “If I had, I wouldn’t have gone.”

“You shouldn’t have gone anyway,” Alexander said as he knelt down and began to unlace his wife’s boots. This was the second time in three days that he’d done so, but this time, he didn’t feel the urge to pass off the task to a maid.

He unlaced her boots and set them aside before he reached for the top of her sock and began slowly pulling it down off her foot. She was so cold that she was trembling, which made pulling the wet sock away from her skin harder than it should have been, but he went slowly and gently so he wouldn’t hurt her.

He finished with one foot and reached for her other foot, carefully doing the same on the other side. Her feet were so cold. He began rubbing them, and she winced in pain. “I’m sorry,” he said. “We have to get them warm.”

Guinevere arrived with dry clothes for Beatrice, catching his eye from the doorway.

“Everyone out,” he announced.

Everyone looked at him in surprise, including Beatrice.

“Guinevere has dry clothes,” he explained, “and you’re not leaving this fire.”

“I don’t need to change,” Beatrice said, and Alexander shook his head.

“You are getting out of those wet things,” he said firmly, getting to his feet and walking away, ushering everyone out.

He looked back before closing the door, and Beatrice was looking over her shoulder toward him, a grateful smile on her face.

He smiled back before closing the door to give her privacy, but then his face turned to stone.

His wife could have died, and he hadn’t even known she was outside.

If they had been so lax now, what would happen when the sorcerer arrived?

“We need to talk,” he said to Jenkins. “She could have died, and there’s more. I’m going to go change into dry clothes, and I’ll talk to you in my study.”

Dietrich stood by, arms crossed against his chest. “Whatever it is, I’m in,” he said.

“You don’t even know what I’m talking about,” Alexander said. “You don’t want to be involved.”

Dietrich planted his feet. “If it involves Beatrice and her safety and well-being, yes, I do. I love that girl, and she seems to genuinely care for you. I will do anything in my power to see that she is happy and healthy for the rest of her days. So whatever you’re discussing, I want to be involved.”

Alexander took a deep breath and looked at Jenkins, who shrugged. He took another deep breath and turned back to Dietrich. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Dietrich grinned. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter Fifteen

Beatrice

BEATRICE WAS FINALLY BEGINNING to warm up again when Alexander and Dietrich came back into the study, both of them wearing dry clothes. Guinevere had tucked her in under the blankets and moved her chair even closer to the fire, which felt so wonderful. The painful tingles in her feet were beginning to subside, her teeth were no longer chattering, and the shivering had calmed a bit.

She hadn't expected to be so cold once she came into the warm air, but it almost felt worse than being outside.

She looked up at Alexander and Dietrich and smiled at them.

"Thank you for rescuing me," she said. "I don't know what I would have done without you."

"You would have made your way back to the manor," Dietrich said, "I have no doubts—you are one of the strongest women I know."

"Aside from your mother," Beatrice said with a smile. "And I owe it all to her."

Dietrich shrugged. "She would suggest otherwise."

"Wherever it came from," Alexander said, "I am thankful, but I'm afraid we must discuss a more serious matter."

Beatrice raised her eyebrows and waited for him to continue.

"We must discuss what is happening," Alexander said. "Dietrich has expressed interest in joining our efforts."

Beatrice glanced at Guinevere, who was frowning. "Can you tell him?" she asked, looking back at Alexander.

"No," Alexander said.

"I see," Beatrice said, glancing between Dietrich and Alexander. "And you want me to tell him everything?"

"That was my intention," Alexander said. "I think having someone else on our team will be helpful."

“Does Jenkins know?” Beatrice asked. “I might suggest getting his take on the issue as well.”

Alexander shook his head. “I haven’t been able to tell him, but he and Mrs. Jenkins should be on their way.”

“So we’ll wait for him,” Beatrice said as Rose jumped onto her lap. She began to pet the kitten, who curled up in her lap and began to purr.

Dietrich would either think they were all playing a prank on him, or he might have some insight. You never could tell with Dietrich.

“Is anyone going to actually tell me what’s going on?” Dietrich asked.

“Be patient,” Beatrice scolded. “You’re worse than a child. Wait for Jenkins to get here.”

Dietrich huffed and leaned against the wall. “You’re mean,” he said.

“You are incorrigible,” Beatrice responded with a grin.

“Are you always like this?” Alexander asked, looking between the two of them.

“Well, he is my brother,” Beatrice teased. “Of course.”

The door to the study opened, and Jenkins arrived with Mrs. Jenkins in tow. “How can we help, my lord?” Jenkins asked.

“Come and sit,” Alexander said, gesturing toward the sofa. “We need to talk.”

Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins looked at each other. “I think this conversation needs tea,” Mrs. Jenkins said, ringing the bell by the door and instructing the maid who came running immediately to bring refreshments before sitting on the sofa next to Guinevere.

“Beatrice will explain,” Alexander began, looking at Beatrice and nodding slightly, so Beatrice took a deep breath and turned to Dietrich.

“Alexander is under a silencing curse,” Beatrice said with a grimace. “I don’t know much more than that yet. Oh, and we only have until his birthday to figure out how to break it before something is going to happen, but I don’t know what it is.”

Dietrich stood frozen, staring at Beatrice. “You’re joking, right?”

“Unfortunately not,” Alexander said, his voice deep and strong, despite the topic. “I—”

He stopped and frowned.

The kitten on her lap let out a chirp and Beatrice turned her attention to Rose. “You have something to say?” she asked. What if the dragon knew more about the curse than any of them?

“Does she know anything?” Beatrice asked Guinevere.

Guinevere tilted her head. “I suppose she could,” she said, looking at Rose. “Do you know anything about Lord Dunham’s curse?”

The dragon started chirping again, and everyone in the room turned to Guinevere the instant she finished speaking. “So, it turns out she was surprisingly informative,” Guinevere said. “She knows the sorcerer who cursed Lord Dunham, because the same sorcerer discarded her egg when it no longer had enough magic for him. She’s here because of him.”

Alexander’s mouth opened, then closed.

“And she said that he is coming back soon.”

“Is that what we’re waiting for?” Beatrice asked, turning to Alexander. “Why is he coming back?”

“We are to prepare for a wedding,” Alexander said. “I received a letter this morning.”

Beatrice frowned. “You received a letter this morning, and you didn’t tell me?”

“I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to tell you before you disappeared into a snowstorm,” Alexander said pointedly. “You were still in the library, so I didn't want to disturb you.”

“And I'm assuming that the wedding is not for you?” Beatrice said, her tone just as pointed. “Given that we already had one.”

“I think we could make it for us,” Alexander said, his face turning serious. He may have been sitting across from her in a room full of people, but when he spoke, it felt like she was the only one in the room. “I would love to give you a real wedding,” he continued.

“And when are we supposed to have this wedding prepared by?” Mrs. Jenkins asked practically.

“In four days' time,” Alexander said, taking a deep breath. He stood, picking up a piece of paper and walking over to hand it to Beatrice, who scanned the contents quickly.

Dunham,

I will be there in four days’ time with my daughter. I expect a wedding prepared.

Lohndrey

“You are to marry his daughter in four days?” she asked, her voice rising as she spoke the words. “But we’re already married.”

“Indeed, we are,” Alexander said.

Beatrice's mind began to race. “That's why you wanted to marry me. If you’re already married, you cannot marry his daughter. But what will he do when he finds out?” Her voice caught.

“That’s a good question,” Alexander said, his mouth closing again.

“You don't know?” Beatrice asked.

“I hope not,” Alexander said.

Beatrice pressed her lips together. The answer didn't convince her that he didn’t know more. Did he have his suspicions? But the only way for it —

No.

It couldn’t be. “Was he the cause of the fire?” she asked quietly, dreading the answer.

“Yes,” Alexander said quietly. Beatrice's heart broke for him all over again. “My father tried—I wasn’t ready for marriage,” he said, his voice choking up.

Was it the curse or the emotion?

“Your father was a good man,” Jenkins said, his voice trembling. “I am sorry that you were left alone to deal with this, all this time. I wish I had known.”

“So your father told him you weren’t ready for marriage and tried to resist, so Lohndrey started a fire?” Beatrice asked, her voice shaky. “And you don't know what he'll do this time?”

Dietrich let out a grunt of anger, glaring at Alexander. “You put her in this danger,” he said, his voice harsh. “You knew this was a possibility, and you did it anyway.”

Alexander looked miserable. “I did,” he said, “but I didn’t know for a fact until this morning that any of this was real or that he was coming back.”

“So you chose Beatrice to be your sacrificial lamb,” Dietrich said, his voice bitter. “And you didn't tell her any of it.”

“Dietrich,” Beatrice said firmly.

“Don't you see the danger he's putting you in?” he asked, his voice softening. “Don’t you care?”

“Of course I care,” Beatrice said, her voice firm. “But Alexander wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t important. Now we need to figure out how to keep everyone safe.”

“Do you have a plan?” Dietrich asked, turning to Alexander. “Or was your plan to let Beatrice take the fall?”

“Dietrich,” Beatrice said, her tone calm. “He has gone through enough. He doesn’t need you attacking him right now.”

“I deserve it,” Alexander said. “It was my biggest regret the whole time, but I couldn’t see another way to—”

He swallowed hard, his eyes pleading with her to understand.

Beatrice hoped he could see that she was on his side, even with Dietrich’s logical points. What must it have been like to be so alone for all of this, not able to ask for counsel or even share the heavy burden for all those years?

Dietrich glared at all of them. “If you think I'm leaving you alone to deal with this,” he said to Beatrice, “you're wrong. I'm not leaving until this is over.”

“What about your job?” Beatrice asked.

He shook his head. “Even if the Duke came home tomorrow, I’m still not leaving. You’re more important to me than a job, and I’m not going to stand here and watch while they decide your future without you.”

Beatrice sighed. “Dietrich, it's not their fault. It’s the sorcerer’s fault. And now we must come up with a plan to defeat him together.”

She handed the letter to Guinevere, who looked it over herself before handing it to Dietrich.

He glanced at it, his jaw clenching.

“So we'll prepare for a wedding,” Dietrich said, leveling his gaze at Alexander. “But you will be marrying Beatrice again, not this other girl. And if anything happens to hurt Beatrice, I will kill you myself.”

“And as I said the last time you threatened me,” Alexander said, “I understand and accept it.”

“You’ve already threatened him?” Beatrice asked, glaring at Dietrich. “Did your mother not raise you to have any manners? He’s a lord. You could get in serious trouble.”

“I don’t care,” Dietrich said. “Not if you’re in danger.”

“Well, you better care for your mother’s sake,” Beatrice said with a frown. “Or know what she would do if anything happened to you.”

“She would have you,” Dietrich said, “and I intend to make sure she doesn’t lose you. So we’re preparing a wedding, but that’s not enough. What else are we doing?”

Chapter Sixteen

Beatrice

BEATRICE WATCHED THE SUNLIGHT fade through the curtains as she prepared for bed with Guinevere’s help. It had been a long day, with many shocking discoveries, and she was exhausted.

But she couldn't shake the feeling that Alexander might want to see her before they went to sleep in their separate chambers. She would not be making the mistake of falling asleep in his bed again, even if it had been nice to wake up with someone else for the first time in her life.

She hadn't felt as alone as she usually did.

It didn’t matter, though—it didn't seem possible for her to be with someone the way marriage required. She didn't know how to live with someone else. What if she messed it all up?

Her father had been working the trade routes since she was a tiny child, and she’d often spent the night with Dietrich and his mother until her father had deemed her old enough to spend the night on her own.

She was used to being alone.

Which was why it was so surprising that she was feeling drawn to spend more time with Alexander before she fell asleep.

It hardly seemed possible that she had someone in her life now, but she was already enjoying it, even if their future was uncertain.

She felt ill at the thought of everything Alexander had revealed. It didn't seem possible for someone to hate him so much that he had murdered Alexander's parents, and the fact that he was coming back was terrifying.

And they didn’t know how he would react to Alexander already being married.

Guinevere murmured a good night, and Beatrice responded with a quiet smile. Neither of them had felt much like talking tonight while Guinevere helped with her hair and dress, each preferring to ponder in silence after the events of the day.

Dietrich had chosen to stay at Eldenwilde. Between the storm and the fact that he was unwilling to leave until Beatrice’s safety was assured, he was very adamant that he was not leaving yet, so he had borrowed some of Jenkins' clothes and was staying in a guest suite not far from Beatrice’s room.

But Beatrice didn't feel the urge to go talk to Dietrich. She wanted to talk to Alexander.

After Guinevere left, she took a deep breath, made her way to the adjoining door, and knocked. She waited for his muffled “come in” before she opened the door and entered, suddenly shy, even though she’d done the same thing the night before.

“Are you well?” Alexander asked. He was already sitting in bed, the covers tucked around his waist.

“I was hoping to talk to you,” Beatrice said, looking away from his bare chest.

It was the first time she had ever entered a man’s bedroom for the express purpose of talking to him, and she wasn't sure what to say or what to do or where to go.

“Come sit,” Alexander said, patting the bed beside him.

Beatrice glanced sideways at the bed.

“We don’t have to fall asleep,” Alexander said with a grin. “I will help you stay awake, but it will be easier to talk if you’re not standing across the room.”

So Beatrice crossed the room and gingerly sat down on the bed next to her husband. He reached over to take the blanket placed on the table beside his bed and give it to her. Had he put it within reach in case she visited him?

The adjoining door snicked open, and an orange kitten padded through from Beatrice’s room, hopping up onto the bed and settling in Beatrice’s lap with a contented purr.

“Are you going to transform?” Beatrice asked her, “or do you prefer to purr as a kitten right now?”

Rose turned into a dragon in an instant but continued to purr.

“Was she a kitten or a dragon when you found her?” Beatrice asked.

“A dragon,” Alexander said. “She looked so tiny and pitiful and cold, surrounded by broken pieces of a green shell, and I knew I had to do something to help her. I had no idea what to do with a baby dragon, but

thankfully, she transformed into a kitten before I got her into the house. I could only hope that her kitten insides were the same as her dragon parts and that she would be able to digest milk. Mrs. Jenkins was more than happy to oblige. I think she was happy to see me find a friend, even if it was only a kitten."

"They seem to care for you very much," Beatrice said.

Alexander reached over to pet Rose, and his fingers brushed against Beatrice's. "They were the closest thing I had to parents after I lost mine," he said. "I don't know what I would have done without them, but I would not be the man that I am today."

"I'm very thankful that you had them," Beatrice said. "I happen to be partial to the man you are today."

Alexander let out a sound that could maybe be described as a chuckle. "I should hope so, given that you married me."

"Did I have a choice?" Beatrice asked, bumping his arm with her shoulder.

"Absolutely," Alexander said, his voice turning completely serious. "You had the choice, and I would never have pressured you to change your mind if you had turned me down. I will admit, though, that I'm glad that you didn't," he added, his voice turning a little less serious. "It's been lovely having someone who knows my secret, and it hasn't even been a day. I can't begin to tell you how much weight it has taken off me to know that I am not alone."

"Well, you'll never be alone again for the rest of your life."

"However long it may be," he said glumly.

Beatrice shook her head. "We are not thinking like that," she said. "We are going to figure this out, and we will protect you from him."

"I'm more concerned with protecting you," Alexander said. "You didn't go into this with the full knowledge of what you were entering into, and I am not going to place importance on my life over yours."

Beatrice looked at him with emotion warring on her face. "I would rather not be mistress of Eldenwilde without you," she said after a moment, "but hopefully it won't come to that. I am still hopeful that we will discover a way to break your curse so you can tell me anything else you might know. Then we will find a way to prevent him from hurting you for already being married."

She sighed. “But I didn’t want to talk about that tonight. I wanted to talk about other things and pretend for a moment that we are not a couple who married not out of necessity, but because we actually like each other.”

“Not that I don’t like you,” she added hastily, her eyes widening. “But perhaps we could pretend to be a normal couple for an evening.”

What was she doing? She was bungling this terribly.

“What does a normal couple do?” Alexander asked.

“I was hoping you would know,” Beatrice admitted. “My mother left when I was only a baby, and my father has been gone more often than not ever since. I had a good example of a mother in Dietrich’s mother, but his father died not long after I moved in with them. So I’ve never really had a model of what marriage should look like.”

Alexander thought for a moment before he shrugged. “I know something we could try,” he said, “if you’re willing.”

Beatrice glanced at him, narrowing her eyes. “What exactly do I have to be willing to try?”

“We could play the game I used to play.”

“What kind of game?” Beatrice asked. “Do married couples really play games?”

Alexander shrugged again. “We’ve already established that neither of us knows what we’re doing, so we might as well do something fun. And I don’t know about you, but I could certainly use the distraction right about now.”

Beatrice admitted that a distraction sounded like a good plan. “What sort of game is it?” she asked.

Alexander sprang out of bed and made his way to the wardrobe. He opened a drawer and rummaged for a moment before pulling a wooden box from the bottom.

“It’s about running your own estate,” he explained as he came back to the bed.

“That sounds…fun,” Beatrice said, wincing a little bit. “This is what you did in your free time growing up?”

Alexander laughed. “Yes. My version of free time is probably not much like yours, but I think it’s fun, and I think you might also. It seems like the sort of thing you would enjoy.”

“If that’s what you would like to do, I don’t have a problem with that. But you’ll have to teach me how to play.”

“I can do that,” Alexander said with a grin. It was the most excited Beatrice had ever seen him, like he had reverted to childhood again, and it was adorable to watch. He dumped out the game pieces and opened up a piece of fabric with a pattern stitched into it.

“How exactly do you play?” she asked.

“It’s simple,” he said, before launching into one of the most convoluted descriptions Beatrice had ever heard. She stared at him blankly as he began putting pieces in front of her. “It’s easier to play than it is to understand,” he admitted. “You’ll figure it out, and I’ll help you, although I might beat you.”

“I’m sure you will,” Beatrice said with a laugh. “In fact, if you don’t, I will be incredibly surprised and maybe a little disappointed in your skills as lord of the estate.”

“If you win, it will be luck,” Alexander said confidently as he continued to lay out pieces in front of her.

Beatrice leaned forward to inspect the pattern stitched into the fabric—it clearly had something to do with the game—and Rose squirmed out of her lap and settled on the bed in front of her instead. “I’m sorry,” Beatrice said, shaking her head at the dragon, “did you not like being squished?”

The dragon let out a disgruntled chirp and Beatrice chuckled. “Terribly sorry, I’ll pet you more when we’re done.”

The candles were beginning to burn low by the time they finished their game, and surprisingly, Beatrice was the winner.

“How did you do that?” Alexander asked, staring at the board incredulously. “I didn’t think you would beat me.”

“I didn’t either,” Beatrice admitted with a giddy laugh, “but it feels great.”

Alexander was a little put out, staring at the game with a grumpy expression. “I can’t believe you beat me,” he said. “Please don’t tell Jenkins. He will never let me hear the end of it. He had to play me more than once, and I always beat him.”

“Then I shall be sure to tell him first thing in the morning,” Beatrice teased.

Alexander groaned and pushed his extra pieces off his lap with a huff. “You must have cheated somehow,” he said. “I’m going to look at the rules again.”

He reached for the book inside the wooden box and began flipping through it.

“I’ve never even heard of this game before—how could I have cheated?” Beatrice said with a grin. “You don’t actually think I cheated.”

“No,” he said with a sigh. “One of the reasons I chose you is because I knew that you would always do the right thing.”

Alexander had paid enough attention to her to notice that? She didn’t realize he’d been so aware of her. “How do you know that?” she asked.

“Because I was willing to give you more pay when I first started the library, and you told me to use that money to pay for schoolbooks for the school instead.”

Beatrice smiled at the memory. She remembered that, though she was surprised he did. “And that’s the reason you chose to marry me?” she teased. “Because I wouldn’t let you pay me enough money?”

Rose noticed that they were done playing and climbed back into Beatrice’s lap, rubbing her head under Beatrice’s wrist.

“Did you need more?” he asked.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I didn’t need more. I already had more than enough.”

“I still think I should have paid you more.” Alexander shrugged. “But I wasn’t going to lose you by insisting on paying you more than you would take.”

Beatrice smiled. “I wonder how the library is getting on without me,” she said.

“Well, you told me who to put in charge of it,” he said. “So I did that, and I’m sure it’s getting along well. Besides, even if it wasn’t, you don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

“If you think I’m going to stop worrying about my library simply because I married you,” she said, “you’re wrong. It will always be my library. In fact, it may be even more my library now than it was before.”

“I could agree with that statement,” he said, “but I’m afraid you’ll have to give it up for now. Perhaps someday we’ll find a way for you to take it over again.”

“I hope so,” Beatrice said with a smile, thinking back to cool winter evenings snuggled up near the fire with a book in her lap. “Although your library here is a pretty good substitute.”

“I should hope so,” Alexander said.

Rose purred from Beatrice’s lap as Alexander picked up the game pieces and put them back in the wooden box. Beatrice studied her husband’s face, noting the worry lines etched near his eyes and the way he had suddenly deflated. “We will figure it out, Alexander,” she said quietly. “I promise.”

She impulsively reached for his hand, catching it in hers and giving it a squeeze. When she went to let go, Alexander didn’t. “Thank you,” he said, and those words meant more than any words she’d heard before.

Chapter Seventeen

Alexander

AS ALEXANDER STOOD IN the foyer and waited for his wife to come down the stairs, he took a deep breath.

Her father should be home from his travels by now. So while he was bringing Beatrice home to get her things, he was also potentially meeting his father-in-law for the first time.

The thought should not have rattled him. He was a lord, and Beatrice's father was merely a trader, but the idea of meeting his wife's father made him twitchy and he wasn't sure what to do with that.

Beatrice hadn’t said much about her father, but she’d hinted that he wasn’t a particularly kind man, and something in Alexander wanted to grind him to a pulp for even potentially mistreating Beatrice.

What kind of man could have a daughter like Beatrice and not make her the center of his entire world?

And from what he'd gathered, the man had been leaving her alone for most of her life. He probably should have asked Beatrice for more details instead of snooping, but he’d discussed it with Dietrich. He’d found out just how often Beatrice had been with Dietrich and his mother while her father continued working and pretending she didn’t exist.

Alexander had never particularly considered having children, but if he ever had a daughter with a smile like Beatrice's, there was no way in the world that he would be able to leave her for that long.

His thoughts were interrupted by a noise at the top of the stairs as his wife began to descend. The corner of Alexander's mouth started to turn up at the sight of her. She was wearing one of his mother's simpler gray dresses, probably in an attempt to appear less grand in front of her father and the folks in town. Knowing her, she wouldn't want to appear as if she was lording her new status over them, and he admired her for it.

But even in a simple dress, she looked stunning.

“Are you ready, my lady?” he asked her as she reached the ground. He held out an arm to steady her, just in case she fell. For some reason, she was prone to falling around him.

“I am ready,” she said, with one of her smiles that instantly made him want to give her anything in the world.

Why did she have such an effect on him? It blew his mind that he could be so enamored of her when they had only just gotten married.

This wasn't normal, was it? It couldn't be.

But as Jenkins opened the door and ushered Beatrice out to the waiting carriage, he couldn't help wondering if maybe it was like this for everyone. If these feelings were the reason why so many people loved being married.

His parents had had a good marriage. Not that he'd particularly cared to notice when he was a young man, but he had never seen them speak harshly to one another, much like Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins. It seemed as if he’d had two good examples of being married, but that didn't mean he wanted to fall in love with his wife.

On the contrary, the thought of opening up to Beatrice the way his parents had been in love with each other was terrifying. Surely he could have a more neutral marriage, one in which they respected each other and cared for each other, but not one where his wife would be willing to die for him.

That seemed a step too far, and yet, it was dangerously close to his reality.

He settled into the carriage next to Beatrice, their shoulders brushing. Perhaps he should have sat across from her, but sharing warmth was a good reason to sit next to her.

It wasn’t as if he was looking for reasons to be close to his wife…but maybe, just maybe, he was.

He could pretend that he wasn’t, but if he was being honest with himself, he knew that there was nothing he wanted more than to sit next to Beatrice and hold her hand.

But holding her hand seemed like reaching too far.

What if she tried to hold his, though?

The drive to town seemed to take far less time than it usually did. Not that he went to town often; he knew what the rumors were—that he was standoffish and didn’t like people—but he had never had much reason to go to town.

The nobility didn’t spend much time there except for the festivals, and a big bonfire didn’t hold any appeal for him for obvious reasons.

But going to town with his wife felt different. It felt like he was a part of something because she was a part of something there, and he was looking forward to meeting all the people who were important to her in her life.

Except her father.

“I thought we could start at your home and collect your things,” Alexander said.

Beatrice smiled up at him. “That sounds like a plan,” she said. “I would love to introduce you to my father. He should meet you.”

“Yes,” Alexander muttered. He would not love to meet her father, but he had no choice.

It would probably be good to meet him though, even if only to cement the fact that he didn’t like him and to put a face to the name he knew too much about. There was something to be said for knowing the person you didn’t like.

The corner of Alexander's mouth tilted up in a smirk. Perhaps it was wrong of him to be so prejudiced against his father-in-law before he’d even met him, but he had never been one to think the best of everyone. Gerald Montgomery had never had his good opinion and most likely never would.

But he would tolerate the man for Beatrice’s sake, if that’s what she wanted.

As they hit the northern edge of town, Alexander tried to think about the last time he had been into town himself. He didn't go often—in fact, he hadn't been in years. The idea of being around so many people did not seem appealing when he had no idea what their intentions were.

A lovely side effect of your parents being murdered.

No, he had no reason to be around others.

There was a lump in his throat as he watched the houses roll by. Maybe he shouldn't have come. Perhaps it would have been better for Beatrice if he hadn’t come.

He was starting to feel nauseated, and they hadn't even gotten out of the carriage yet.

What would happen if he threw up in front of everyone in town? The last thing he wanted, in addition to freaking out, was to be humiliated.

He could always stay in the carriage and let Beatrice go alone.

But no, that was cowardly.

He had come with his wife for a reason. At some point, he would have to join the townsfolk again. He couldn't remain a hermit for the rest of his life. Even if he wanted to, it was not an option—especially not now that he was married and had a wife who was from the town.

She deserved to have a husband who was able to meet her friends without having a panic attack. Even if he wasn't sure he could be that husband for her.

He started breathing a little harder as they rode past the mayor's home and toward the center of town. He still recognized it, which surprised him. Things hadn’t changed much.

It was almost easier that way, because he could pretend he was just going into town to spend time with the Rendon boys.

While they’d all had private tutors at their own estates, there had been children’s activities in town that they’d attended. Those had been some of his favorite times as a child.

Alexander took a deep breath. He could do this. He didn't have a choice. He was already in the carriage, and it was quickly rolling through town.

He looked over at his wife, who was watching the buildings roll by outside the window. He took another deep breath before returning his attention outside, and then something occurred to him. “Does the driver know where your home is?” he asked.

“Yes, he does,” Beatrice said. “I told Jenkins before we left, and he informed the driver.”

Alexander nodded. “I see. I am glad you had the forethought to tell him.”

“Of course,” she said. “Being prepared is my job. One could argue that as the lady of the manor, I should be even more aware of the need to be prepared than I was as the librarian in the Northlands.”

The words coming out of her mouth were right, but the tone of her voice was off.

What was wrong? Was she concerned about her position at Eldenwilde?

She hadn’t had much chance yet to become the lady of the estate. She was learning quickly, though, despite only being in her new role for a few days. He already couldn't imagine his estate without her.

So why did she sound so stiff?

The carriage pulled to a stop, and Alexander took a deep breath.

Apparently it was time to meet his father-in-law. Figuring out why she was acting strange would have to wait.

He turned to Beatrice. “Are you ready?” he asked.

She seemed frozen for the first time since he’d met her, at least from something other than snow. Her hand clutched at the side of the carriage. “We don’t have to go in.”

“We need to get your things,” Alexander said.

“And you should meet him.” The words were stilted, as if she were resigned to the fact.

This wasn’t the Beatrice he knew.

“What’s wrong?” Alexander asked, reaching for her hand.

Beatrice took a deep breath. “He’s probably not going to be very happy that I’m married,” she said slowly. “He enjoyed the fact that I was here when he came home, that he had a kept house, that I would be at his beck and call. He won’t be thrilled that has changed.”

Alexander frowned. His wife, who was usually so confident and bubbly, was sounding unsure of herself and maybe even a little intimidated.

He was ready to do battle on her behalf.

“Has he ever hurt you?” he asked, hating that he had to ask it.

But Beatrice shook her head. “No, he wouldn’t, but he will be very upset,” she said with a sigh.

Alexander clenched his jaw as the footman opened the carriage door, and he stepped out, turning to offer a hand to Beatrice.

If Gerald Montgomery thought he was going to intimidate his daughter, he thought wrong, because Beatrice was no longer alone.

Chapter Eighteen

Beatrice

BEATRICE TOOK ALEXANDER’S HAND as he helped her out of the carriage, and she stood in front of her childhood home.

It hadn't changed in the few days she had been gone, but she had.

Standing here holding her husband's hand, it was difficult to remember why she had always felt at home here. The small cottage held few happy memories for her, and she was dreading the moment her father opened the door. Once he realized she was back, he wouldn’t want her to leave again.

Alexander pulled his hand away, and she almost reached to snatch it back. But then he placed it on her lower back, warm and reassuring, and Beatrice smiled up at him. This was more support than she’d thought she would have when she came back to get her things. She’d assumed she would be staring down her father alone.

But with Alexander at her side, she was not as nervous.

Alexander's presence bolstered her as she walked up to the front door and rapped gently before letting herself in. Her father would be surprised that she would walk into the home that had been hers only a few days before, but he would have to deal with it. With any luck, he would be at the tavern. She just had to get in, get her things, and get back out.

It wasn't as if she had many things to collect. She didn’t need to bring anything to Eldenwilde, because Alexander had been more than generous in taking care of her needs. But there were some things that she would be loath to leave behind, such as her personal collection of books and her mother’s hair comb—the only thing she'd left behind when she disappeared.

“Who’s in my house?” a voice roared, and her father stumbled out of his bedroom.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said when he saw Beatrice, and he made as if he was going to turn around, but then he looked back at her and saw Alexander. His face darkened.

“And who’s this?” he said, making his way toward them. “Are you the man who stole my daughter?”

Beatrice opened her mouth, but Alexander beat her to it.

“I did not steal your daughter, Montgomery,” he said, taking a step forward so he was closer to her father than she was. “Beatrice married me willingly, and we are going to be very happy together.”

He was protecting her.

“And you couldn’t wait for me to get home?” her father said, glaring balefully at Alexander. “I think you married her for a reason, and I’m going to find it out.”

“He did not force me to marry him,” Beatrice stated firmly. Alexander's touch on her waist became firmer, as if he was lending her support, and she took a half step forward to stand beside him. “I married Alexander of my own free will, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

Her father stared in surprise. She had never stood up to him in this way before.

“He has no claim on you,” her father said.

“He does,” Beatrice said. “I am his wife, and that gives him more of a claim than you have.”

Her father glared. “He only married you because he wants something,” he announced.

“As if you don’t?” Beatrice asked. “You only ever wanted me to take care of you. As soon as I was old enough to live here without an adult, you took me from a home where I was loved and brought me here to take care of you. Alexander has taken me to a place where I already feel at home, and I feel loved.”

She didn't dare look at her husband as she uttered those words. She didn't know how he would take it or what he would say, but it was the truth. She felt more loved at Eldenwilde than she ever had with her father.

Even if Alexander wasn't in love with her, he respected her, he cared for her, and he made her feel safe.

She could never return to her father's house, not after experiencing what it felt like to be cared for by a man who was good.

The thought surprised her. All along, everyone had said that Alexander was callous and uncaring. The rumors had called him everything from arrogant to a beast, and she’d foolishly believed them.

But she knew better now. Alexander was a good man, and her father was the beast.

“Your daughter has chosen me,” Alexander said, his hand still firm on her lower back, like an anchor holding her steady in a storm. “Everyone on my estate has already fallen in love with her, and she is welcome to leave if she ever wishes to do so. But I pray she won’t, because I would never be able to find another wife like her. She is kind and caring, she is adventurous and brave, and she is independent but she puts up with me. I hope that we will never be parted.”

His words were spoken swiftly and firmly, and Beatrice glanced up at him in surprise. If he had asked her before today what she thought his feelings were about her, she would have said he was indifferent, that he had married her because he needed a wife before his thirtieth birthday and she was merely a means to an end.

But he was defending her to her father as if he loved her. Even though he hadn't said it in so many words…was it possible that her husband was beginning to feel the same way she was? Could their marriage of convenience become something more?

Her father was turning red in the face, but he seemed unable to find words to refute Alexander. He took a step forward, and Alexander swiftly moved between her and her father, blocking her view of him.

“Touch her, and you will regret it,” Alexander said, his voice low and lethal.

Her father muttered something incoherently, moved around Alexander, and cursed at her as he walked out the door, slamming it behind him. Beatrice's knees began to shake.

Alexander turned to her, concern etched on his face as he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him.

“Thank you, Alexander,” she muttered into his chest as the tears began to flow. Hearing him stand up for her meant more than she could have ever imagined. “I'm glad you came with me.”

Alexander didn't say anything, but he held her tighter, and that alone said enough. He held her until her breathing had slowed and the tears had ceased.

She had been under her father's thumb long enough, and she never would be again.

“Let me just get my things, and we can leave,” she said, taking a step back with a sniffle and wiping her hand over her face. “I don't need much.”

Alexander watched as she hurried around the room. She gathered her books and gently put them into the bag that Alexander held open for her, then crossed the room toward the loft where she had slept for so many years.

She quickly climbed the ladder and looked down at the pallet she had slept on, with the one quilt she'd had since she was a child. It was too small for her now, and she’d had to curl up underneath it to stay warm.

In an act of defiance, she grabbed it. If she left it, her father would simply take it and put it on top of his other quilts. This one was hers.

She gathered the hair comb her mother had left and the two books she kept up here—her Bible and the last book she'd been reading before she left—and turned to climb down the ladder. But Alexander was there, poking his head over the edge of the loft, taking in the only space that had been hers.

“Can I carry anything for you?” he asked, his eyes meeting hers.

She nodded and handed him the quilt, then turned to grab her extra clothes. Her father had no use for them, and she could give them to someone on the estate who might. She felt no need to leave him anything.

Having taken the last of her things, Beatrice glanced around the loft, which now only held the bare mattress and the lantern she used to read at night. Feeling a surge of anger, she grabbed the lantern too.

Her father didn’t need that, either.

Alexander chuckled and handed her a bag, into which she shoved everything.

“I'll take it,” he said, holding out his hand for it.

There was a lump in her throat as she handed everything she had once held dear to her husband, who slung the bag over his shoulder and descended the ladder. He respectfully took a few steps away as Beatrice also climbed down, averting his eyes to avoid looking up her skirt.

He was truly a gentleman.

Beatrice looked around what had once been her home and took a deep breath.

She would never come back here again. It held no happy memories for her.

Alexander held out his hand, and she took it. He laced their fingers together, and the gesture felt more meaningful than anything they had previously shared.

Her father had been the person who was forced to have her, but Alexander was the man who had chosen to keep her.

She looked up at him and smiled. It wasn't her usual smile, one full of joy. It was a smile that said all the things she couldn't say—that she was glad this part of her life was over and that she was ready to move forward with Alexander.

“Shall we go to the café and see Thea?” Alexander asked, squeezing her hand gently.

Beatrice's eyes threatened to fill with tears again. How did he know exactly what would make her feel better?

“That would be wonderful,” she said, her voice catching in her throat.

Alexander squeezed her hand again as he led her toward the door. She paused in the doorway, looking back one last time, then turned to smile at Alexander.

No more looking back. She was ready to look toward the future.

“Should we walk or ride?” Alexander asked, as he handed the bags with her things in them to one of the footmen waiting with the carriage.

“I think we should walk,” Beatrice said, allowing a teasing tone to enter her voice as she added, “if it's not too far for you.”

“I’d follow you anywhere,” he said, offering his arm.

She didn’t want to take his arm. She wanted to walk through town holding her husband’s hand, so instead of taking his arm, she reached for his hand.

Alexander’s eyes widened, but he allowed her to take his hand, his fingers lacing between hers again as if they belonged there. She began walking and he followed, looking around town as if he’d never seen it before.

“You don’t know where we’re going, do you?” she asked with a grin.

He shook his head. “I haven’t the slightest clue, but I trust you.”

Warmth bloomed in Beatrice’s chest at his words. He trusted her.

A cold breeze whistled through the slushy streets, but Beatrice felt warm and safe with Alexander. The melancholy that had overtaken her while getting her things disappeared. She was on her way to the café, to one of

her favorite places, with her husband for the first time. She couldn’t be sad anymore.

Things were only going to get better from here.

Inspiration struck and Beatrice turned to Alexander, who raised an eyebrow at her. “Do you want to stop in the library?” she asked, her heart begging to visit the place that meant the world to her. She needed to see if it had fallen apart without her, or if Eugenia had risen to the task.

“I hoped you would take me there,” he said, the words melting her heart.

“You could have asked,” she teased, if only to avoid him noticing how much it affected her.

“I wasn’t sure if you would be glad to visit or if it would make you sad, and I didn’t want to put you through too many emotions in one day,” he said.

Beatrice took a deep breath. He had spared a thought for her emotions?

“I appreciate that,” she said, “but I want to show you, and I do want to check in with Eugenia,” she admitted with a grin. “I'll be honest, I don't know how she's going to handle this job. I want to make sure that all is well before we leave her there for the long term. And we're not far from the library—it's only across the way from the café.”

“Which must be why you spent so much time there,” her husband said.

Beatrice grinned. “Yes, that’s part of it. When my father was not in town, it was much easier to go to the café for a meal rather than make my own at home. And since I had a more than generous salary, I was able to do so far more often than I probably should have.”

“I am glad that you had the café and Thea,” he said, “and I'm very glad that you were not alone.”

“I am too,” Beatrice admitted. “It would have been very lonely without her.”

Walking through the streets that had been her home for so long felt so surreal now that she no longer lived here. Everything was familiar, the people were familiar, even—

She grimaced as one particular person came into focus, walking toward her with purpose.

“Not him,” she said with a groan. “How did he find me?”

“Who is it?” Alexander asked, as if he was ready to whisk her away if he needed to.

“It's Roan,” she said with a sigh. “My father must have told him I was here when he left.”

“You don't have to say anything,” Alexander said. “I will take care of it.”

Beatrice smiled. “Thank you for being sweet, but I can handle it.”

She took a deep breath as Roan drew near. She hadn’t wanted to do this today, but apparently, it was the day for her to see all the people she didn’t want to deal with.

“I can take care of it if you want,” Alexander said once again, looking down at her in concern.

Beatrice shook her head. “It will be okay,” she said. “I just need to speak with him.”

Not that she wanted to, but she had to tell him that she was married, and he no longer had any reason to be interested in her.

“I will be right here if you need me,” Alexander said, letting go of her hand and placing his on her lower back.

Beatrice stopped walking and leaned into him, craving his support, as she waited for Roan to close the distance between them.

She wouldn’t give Roan the satisfaction of walking to him. She’d make him come to her.

“Hello, Beatrice,” Roan said as he approached. “I heard you were back in town.”

“Yes, I am,” Beatrice said. “With my husband.”

She didn't miss the way Roan's eyes widened at her words. It gave her immense satisfaction to see him realize that she was no longer in his reach.

“Your husband?” Roan asked. “Isn't that a little sudden?”

“Not at all,” Beatrice said with a winning smile. “Good day.”

With that, she walked past Roan and up the front steps of the building just beyond him before opening the door and pulling Alexander inside.

Once they were safely in, she grinned. “Did you see the look on his face?” she asked Alexander. “That was worth every moment.”

Alexander laughed. “I am glad it was satisfying.”

Before she could make a comment about Alexander laughing—had he actually laughed?—Eugenia appeared around the corner.

“Who’s this?” she asked, before gasping. “Beatrice, you're back!”

“I am,” Beatrice said, hurrying forward to give her friend a hug. “I’ve missed you.”

She took a step back and grabbed Eugenia by the shoulders. “And how are you getting along here?”

“We are getting along just fine,” Eugenia said. “Tom has been helping me.”

Oh, really? That was interesting news.

“Tom?” Beatrice asked with a grin, winking at the older woman, who began to blush.

“It's nothing,” Eugenia said.

“I don't think it is,” Beatrice said with a grin, “but I think you'll just have to tell me what happens the next time I come back.”

“You needn't rush to come,” Eugenia said, pointing her finger at Beatrice. “I'm getting along just fine. And apparently, you are too,” she said, turning to look Alexander over.

“I’m doing well enough,” Beatrice said. It was her turn to blush. Trust Eugenia to see straight to the heart of the matter—and she probably thought Alexander was handsome, too.

“I can see that. Now, you’d better get along and see Thea or she’ll be very cranky,” Eugenia said. “Get out of here and let me take my nap in peace.”

“You’re not napping when you have people in the library?” Beatrice asked.

“Of course not,” Eugenia said, shaking her head. “Who do you think I am?”

“A very tired human,” Beatrice said.

Eugenia reached out and gave her a little shove toward the door, pushing her into Alexander, who caught her easily.

Beatrice stared up at him, forgetting for a moment that they had an audience.

“Now you two lovebirds tell Thea I said hello,” Eugenia said, giving Beatrice a wink before heading back to the desk that had once been Beatrice’s.

There was a lump in her throat as Beatrice said, “I will. And Eugenia?”

The old woman looked at her, a knowing look in her eyes.

“Thank you,” Beatrice said.

Eugenia nodded and Beatrice stepped away from Alexander, already missing his warmth, before leading him to the door.

She held his hand as they walked to the café, and when he opened the door for her, the familiar smells hit her and she nearly started crying again. She had missed this place, even though it had only been a couple of days.

“Beatrice!” Thea exclaimed when she saw her, hurrying around the counter to meet her halfway. She threw her arms around her friend, and Beatrice melted into the hug, the tears threatening to pour out of her.

“What happened?” Thea demanded, pulling back and putting her hand on Beatrice’s shoulder.

“I got married,” Beatrice said with a dazzling smile, knowing that Thea was about to interrogate her and hoping to head it off at the pass.

“We heard,” Thea said shortly.

“I married Lord Dunham,” she said, turning and gesturing to Alexander, who stood behind her, his arms crossed uncomfortably.

Thea’s eyes widened. “My lord,” she said, bowing slightly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’ve heard much about you,” Alexander said, coming up behind Beatrice.

Thea looked at Beatrice, her eyes still wide as an owl’s. “It’s a long story,” Beatrice said with a grin. “But I was hoping I could get a drink from you.”

“Of course,” Thea said, hurrying behind the counter. “What would you like, Lord Dunham?”

He turned to Beatrice and gave a slight shrug. “I don’t know what I want,” he said, “but I bet you can find me something I’ll like.”

Beatrice smiled at her husband. “You’ll like anything here,” she said. “It’s all amazing.”

“Then we’ll have to keep coming back until I’ve tried everything,” he said.

And if Beatrice wasn’t already falling for him, that statement would have pushed her over the edge.

Chapter Nineteen

Alexander

ALEXANDER WAS IN HIS study, still hard at work on the document full of notes he was making for Beatrice, when the door opened without a knock and his wife strode in with a grin on her face. She was followed by Guinevere, who looked slightly less excited.

“We found a book, and Guinevere has something for you to try,” Beatrice announced as Rose scurried toward her.

“You do?” he asked, not daring to hope.

Hope was a dangerous thing. If you allowed it to take root, it would grow…then leave you with nothing but ashes when it burned.

“What do you have for me?”

Guinevere closed the door of his study and looked around the room before saying quietly, “I have a potion for you to try.”

Alexander frowned at the small jar in her hand. “A potion?” he asked. “Like a magic potion?”

Guinevere shushed him. “Not so loud.”

“I will make sure nothing happens to you,” Alexander reassured her. “If this potion will fix me, then you will have my eternal gratitude.”

“I don't know if it will work,” Guinevere cautioned, arriving at his desk and handing it to him. “But I thought about the basics of your curse and how you cannot speak the words. So I played with that after reading the book Beatrice found, and came up with this potion that may help you to speak more freely.”

“Really?” Alexander asked, eyeing the jar. “I don't suppose you've tried it yet?”

“She doesn't have a problem with speaking,” Beatrice reminded him as she picked up Rose and began to cuddle the kitten in her arms. “What harm can it do to try it?”

“It might taste gross,” he said.

“It probably will,” Guinevere admitted. “I haven’t learned how to make them taste good in addition to doing what they need to do.”

“Of course I get the apprentice,” Alexander muttered. Beatrice shot him a glare, and he took a deep breath. “Fine, I will try it,” he said. “Just don't let it kill me.”

He took the potion and didn't dare to take a breath before pouring the contents down his throat. The first breath he inhaled after swallowing tasted as if he had just eaten the contents of a frog's stomach.

“What was in that?” he croaked. Guinevere began to list several herbs and other ingredients. He wasn't paying attention. He hadn't really wanted to know, and now his stomach was beginning to gurgle.

“Just wondering,” he asked, “what happens if it comes back up? Will it still work?”

“I don’t know,” Guinevere admitted.

Alexander clutched at his stomach as the potion began to bubble inside him.

“Is it supposed to feel like I'm boiling a pot of water in my stomach?” he asked, grimacing.

He tried to stand, but Guinevere appeared and pushed down on his shoulders.

“I wouldn't stand yet,” she said. “Just let it do its job.”

As Alexander grew lightheaded, he glared at the maid. “This is the last time I'm ever taking a potion,” he muttered before slumping over on his desk.

When his eyes opened again, everything was hazy. How long had he been out? He sat up, glaring at Beatrice and Guinevere. His wife was making her way around his desk with fear on her face, so he probably hadn’t been out long.

When he sat up, she let out a sigh of relief, her hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

“Are you well?” she asked quietly, almost as if she was afraid to say anything. Rose jumped from her arm to sit on his desk in front of him, licking her front paw as if to say she wasn’t at all concerned for him.

He opened his mouth to ask what they had done to him, but no words would come out. It was as if he had been completely silenced by the potion, not merely sentenced to not speak of his curse.

“What happened?” he roared, though no sound came out of his mouth. The girls stared at each other.

“It may have been too little,” Guinevere said with embarrassment. “I shall have to make another potion, my lord, to bring your voice back.”

Alexander glared, and Beatrice let out a giggle. He turned to glare at her.

“I'm sorry, Alexander,” she said, still giggling. “But you must admit, it is a little funny.”

He shook his head and pointed at Guinevere, then pointed at the door.

“Right away, my lord,” she said, bowing her head before scurrying out of the room. Beatrice continued to laugh at him as she attempted to talk to him about what she had found in the library that morning. Apparently, there had been a book on potions, which is where Guinevere had found the recipe for the particularly nasty concoction she'd forced down his throat.

“I need something else to eat,” he wrote, showing the paper to Beatrice. “So I can get the taste of frog out of my mouth.”

Beatrice grinned and rang the bell for Jenkins. She asked for tea and sandwiches to be brought, then returned to his side.

“What are you working on?” she asked, leaning over to look at the paper spread in front of him. She grimaced as she realized it was his will.

“You mustn't give up hope,” she said.

Alexander shook his head. He wasn't going to try to explain it to her. Beatrice would have to hope enough for both of them.

“Well, I won't give up hope,” Beatrice said, as if reading his thoughts. “Because we’re not going to let this defeat us. I plan on growing old with you here, and you'd better not let anything get in the way of that, especially not your own doubt.”

Alexander shook his head again. He wasn't letting his doubt win. He was simply being realistic. If he hadn't been able to figure out what to do by now, how were they going to manage it?

Before she could say anything else, there was a knock on the door, and Dietrich strode in.

“Ah, good. I was looking for you, Beatrice,” he said. “I was hoping that we could go over plans for setting up a guard around the place. They may not be able to help with magical problems, but if the sorcerer arrives with men of his own, we can make sure that we are at least protected on a human level.” Dietrich looked at Alexander. “What do you think?”

Alexander turned and glared at Beatrice.

“Alexander may be having a little difficulty speaking at the moment,” she said in a measured tone that didn't at all imply that she was at fault.

Alexander glared at her some more.

“I am hopeful that his voice will return to him momentarily,” Beatrice said with a grin.

“What did you do?” Dietrich asked, sighing. “I'm sorry, Lord Dunham. She is quite a troublemaker. I should have warned you before you married her.”

Alexander sighed and rolled his eyes.

He would have married her anyway, but it would have been nice to know that she had a devious side before he did. He would have been more prepared for her to do something like have him drink a potion that would take away his voice.

Fortunately, it was only a little while before Guinevere came scurrying back into his study with another potion for him to try.

He held his breath as he accepted it. Should he even attempt to try this one? If he didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to speak…but who knew what would happen after he drank this one?

And if he didn’t drink it, he wouldn’t have to taste that awful mess again.

But it wouldn't do for him to be mute for the rest of his life.

He closed his nose and took the potion in one big gulp. As it slid down his throat, it burned. Was it going to make his situation even worse?

His stomach began to rumble as it bubbled inside him. If he’d thought the first one tasted like frogs, this one tasted even worse.

He gagged and turned to Beatrice and Guinevere. He didn't want to open his mouth, fearing his voice wouldn't work, but he did.

“That is the most awful tasting thing I have ever tried in the world. Why on earth did you make me do that?”

He couldn’t stop more words from pouring out. “I can't believe you took away my voice with the first potion, and then the second potion to make it come back was even worse. What am I supposed to do now? I'm just going to keep talking about it because I can't seem to stop talking. Guinevere, what did you do to me?”

Guinevere, Dietrich, and Beatrice stared at him in horror.

“Somebody give me another potion. I don't want to be talking like this for the rest of my life. Beatrice, this is your fault. What happened? Go find

that book you found. Where is it? I need to find the recipes and make it so you can make me stop talking because I can't make myself stop talking and this is going to drive me mad, and it's going to drive you mad, and it's going to drive Dietrich mad, and Guinevere mad, and the whole world mad because I can't stop talking and nobody is going to want to be around me and I am going to be sick of myself."

Beatrice turned to Guinevere, who shrugged.

"Somebody figure out right away how to make this stop before I have to start screaming."

"Why don't you talk to Rose?" Beatrice suggested, picking her from her spot on his desk and shoving the kitten into his lap as all three of them scurried out of his study.

Alexander kept talking to the kitten, the words driving him wild as he couldn't stop talking. Rose stared at him in the way only a cat could, asking silently if he had truly gone mad. He tried to explain to the kitten what was going on, but he wasn't sure she understood any of it because, frankly, he didn't understand it either.

As he kept talking and talking, his voice began to grow hoarse. He stumbled to the door and yanked on the bell pull.

Jenkins popped his head in and Alexander said, "Would you please get me some tea?" before turning back to the cat and beginning to talk to her again, hoping that Jenkins wouldn't realize he couldn't stop talking.

This was worse than the silencing potion from before. How were they going to turn this off, and what was it going to do to his tongue? Would he be able to speak after this at all? Would he even want to hear himself talk?

Maybe it would be enough for him to be quiet forever. Maybe he didn't need the silencing curse broken, maybe he could just be quiet for the rest of his life. That would suit him better than the never-ending monologue.

Jenkins came in with the tea and stared at him curiously as he poured it, while Alexander continued his monologue to the cat. "Thank you, Jenkins," Alexander said, before returning to Rose and telling her a story about his childhood when he had been playing with some kittens of his.

It was more information than had come out of him in years. But since he couldn't stop talking, telling his kitten about cats seemed like a decent enough way to pass the time while he waited for the others to come back with a potion that would hopefully stop the issue.

It felt like hours before they came back, and his throat was quite sore when Guinevere approached, her fingers trembling as she handed him another potion bottle. “I'm so sorry, my lord. That one must have been too much. Let's see if this one will work better.”

Alexander growled as he held his nose and drank the rest of the potion. This one, surprisingly, neither tasted like frogs nor made him want to vomit. It tasted fine, and as it settled in his stomach, there were no unpleasant side effects. Was it possible that this potion was just right?

He waited for a moment, taking a sip of tea now that he was no longer talking nonstop.

“Can you speak?” Beatrice asked after a moment.

“I believe so,” Alexander said, then closed his mouth and waited to see if the unstoppable stream of words would start again. But it didn't happen. He was able to control whether he talked or not.

That was something he hadn't taken for granted until the past couple of hours.

He never should have listened to Beatrice or Guinevere in the first place.

“Now, what was all that for?” he growled, turning to Guinevere. “It's not like it's actually going to let me talk about the sorcerer and the stupid curse he put me under.”

He stopped talking, his eyes wide. Beatrice and Guinevere grinned and hugged each other, and Dietrich clapped. “You did it,” Beatrice squealed to Guinevere.

Alexander looked at the women with an apologetic grin. “I'm sorry for doubting you,” he said. “I should have trusted you both.”

His wife shook a finger at him. “And don't you forget it,” she said. “I am almost always right, especially when it's something I find in a book.”

Alexander laughed and turned to Dietrich. “Is she always like this?” he asked.

“Unfortunately,” Dietrich said with a sigh.

Alexander stood as Beatrice approached him with a giddy grin and threw her arms around him.

“I'm so glad you can talk about it,” she said, her voice muffled by his chest.

“I am, too,” he admitted, wrapping his arms around her, leaning down, and taking a deep breath. Her hair smelled like flowers, and she fit into his arms just right.

He never wanted to let her go.

And for the first time in many years, he felt a bit of hope. Maybe he could win, and maybe he could enjoy the rest of his life with Beatrice. And maybe, just maybe, the feelings he had for his wife were turning into love. And that was more than he had ever dared to hope for.

Chapter Twenty

Beatrice

BEATRICE CAME DOWN THE stairs and made her way to Alexander's study. He was waiting for her at his desk, a frown on his face as he stared at the papers in front of him. They didn't have much time left, and she could tell the waiting was wearing on him. If only she could promise that it would be okay.

She sighed and made her way to him. “Hello,” she said when he didn’t seem to see her, completely lost in thought. “Are you ready for dinner?”

He looked up at her, and his eyes brightened for a moment. “Hello,” he said, running his fingers through his hair. “I would love to go to dinner with you. I need to get away from this for a minute.”

Beatrice smiled sympathetically and offered her hand as Alexander came around the side of his desk. She wasn’t sure if he would take it, but she thought maybe he could use the comfort. He stared at her hand for a moment before accepting it, his fingers twining through hers.

“I trust you had a good day,” he asked, “aside from the part where you tried to poison me?”

Beatrice giggled. “We weren’t trying to poison you,” she said. “I’m sorry that Guinevere is new at the illegal magic she practiced to try to break your curse, but really, she did the best she could.”

“I should be grateful that her best didn’t actually poison or maim me, I suppose,” Alexander said sarcastically.

Beatrice nodded in approval. “Exactly. It could have been so much worse.”

She chuckled at the look Alexander sent her way. “It’s true,” she protested. “You could have died.”

“Don’t remind me,” he said. “I’m never going to listen to you again.” But his fingers squeezed hers.

“I found something else interesting in that book,” Beatrice said. “I thought you might want to know about it.”

Alexander raised an eyebrow and waited.

“It seems that sorcerers can siphon power from dragon eggs,” she said. “The dragon retains more of the egg’s power as it grows, so there’s less for the sorcerer to use. And when the dragon is full-grown and ready to hatch, there’s no magic left for the sorcerer. So Rose’s theory that the sorcerer left her here is very plausible,” she continued. “If he couldn’t draw any more magic from her egg, he might have just discarded it.”

“Why would he throw it away?” Alexander asked.

“The only thing that makes sense to me,” Beatrice said, “is if he didn’t know the dragon inside survives the process. If he assumed it killed the dragon, then I can see why he would discard the egg and move on. He probably found another egg somewhere.”

Alexander frowned as they entered the dining room. “Where would he get more eggs?”

“My research indicated that many dragons are born in the north mountains, where the terrain helps hide them and protect their magic from unscrupulous humans,” Beatrice explained. “The question is how he could get there.”

Alexander thought about it for a moment. “If he’s living somewhere where magic isn’t illegal, such as Delthu, he would have to pass right by us to get to the north mountains.”

Beatrice nodded as Alexander pulled out her chair and helped her sit down. “So he would be able to keep an eye on you at the same time.”

Alexander shivered. “I hate the thought that he’s been watching us for so long.”

“I do too,” Beatrice said softly. “I wish I could know exactly what he’s been up to.”

“I think it’s probably better that we don’t,” Alexander said as he moved to the far side of the table and took his seat.

Beatrice frowned at the distance between them. It had been one thing to sit so far apart when they were merely married for convenience. She didn’t want to sit so far from him anymore.

She stood and walked around to the empty seat to his right.

Alexander raised an eyebrow at her as she sat down.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” she asked, smiling up at him.

“What are you doing?” Alexander asked.

“Sitting next to my husband,” Beatrice said triumphantly. “I would think that would be obvious.”

Alexander shook his head at her. “You amaze me,” he said.

“In what ways?” she asked, surprised at the sudden compliment.

“You broke my curse,” he said, “and I haven’t thanked you yet. I didn’t realize how heavy it was weighing on me that I couldn’t talk about the sorcerer and the curse until that weight was lifted. Without you, I never would have known I could be free of it. So, thank you, Beatrice.”

It took everything in her not to well up with tears at his words. “You’re welcome,” she said simply. “I couldn’t have my husband unable to talk to me,” she teased.

“You’re making light of the situation,” Alexander said, tilting his head, “and I’m trying to tell you how much it really meant. Thank you for pushing through when I had no hope.”

“I said we were a team, and I meant it,” Beatrice said, reaching for his hand and taking it.

“You did,” he admitted. “But I didn’t realize you took it so seriously.”

Beatrice gasped. “Have you ever known me not to take something seriously?”

Alexander chuckled. “I suppose that’s true. You do take everything seriously. It’s one of the reasons I—”

He stopped himself, and Beatrice’s eyes widened. Had he been about to say he loved her? There was a vulnerability in his eyes she hadn’t seen before. She leaned closer, and so did he, the distance between them closing inch by inch.

Beatrice’s heart thumped wildly in her chest. Was he going to kiss her? She would let him if he did. The closer she got to him, the more she wanted it. And there was nothing in the world that could—

The door burst open, and Dietrich strode in.

Beatrice and Alexander sprang apart. For not the first time in her life, Beatrice mentally cursed Dietrich. Blast him and his inconvenient timing.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked, strolling in as if he hadn’t noticed the near-kiss. “I’m sure it’ll be delicious, just like every other meal here.”

“Our cook is certainly good at what she does,” Alexander said, his tone sharp as he turned to Dietrich.

Dietrich’s arrival triggered a flood of servants bearing trays. They served the food and disappeared almost as quickly as they’d come.

“Thank you, Colette,” Beatrice said as the last maid left.

“Oh boy, this looks good,” Dietrich said, digging into his plate of roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and vegetables. “I could live here with you forever, right, Beatrice? You don’t need me to go back to my job.”

Beatrice shared a glance with Alexander, whose cheeks were flushed. It was probably a good thing she couldn’t see her own face.

“I think when this is over, you should go back home,” she said decisively.

She had a husband to kiss, and she didn’t need Dietrich here to ruin it anymore.

Chapter Twenty-One

Alexander

ALEXANDER GLARED AT DIETRICH, who lingered at the table even after dinner had ended. What he was waiting for, Alexander didn't know, but if he didn't leave soon, he would face Alexander's wrath.

Alexander hadn't realized until now how much he wanted to kiss Beatrice. There hadn't been any signs or warnings; the feelings had simply crashed into him. Perhaps it had something to do with how she had saved him from his curse, or maybe it was just that she was the first woman he'd ever grown close to emotionally. Whatever the reason, the need to kiss her was stronger than anything he had felt before, and he wasn't sure what to make of it.

Why did she affect him so much?

It wasn't entirely surprising that he wanted to kiss her. He'd nearly admitted that he loved her—an admission he hadn't even made to himself. The fact that the words had almost slipped out when he least expected them seemed like a sign that perhaps the feelings were real. Maybe he wasn't as stone-hearted as he thought. Maybe his wife was bringing out his human side.

As the servants began clearing the table, Beatrice stood and thanked them before leaving the dining room. She glanced back at Alexander as if to say, *are you coming with me?*

Dietrich bounded to his feet as though to follow her, and Alexander shot him a glare. The man grinned and sat back down, the audacity of it all only fueling Alexander's irritation.

Alexander followed Beatrice out, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Dietrich stayed put. He did, remaining in his chair with a smirk that made Alexander want to pummel him.

Beatrice led him into the sitting room, which had been cleared of furniture and decorated in preparation for their second wedding. She turned to him, smiling as she held out her hand.

“I have a request,” she said.

Alexander raised an eyebrow.

“Will you teach me how to dance?”

He shouldn’t have been surprised by the question, but he was. It had never occurred to him that she didn’t know how to dance. Some part of him had assumed that everyone knew.

Maybe she only knew the simpler country dances?

“It would be my honor,” he said gruffly, taking her hand. “But we don’t have any music.”

“We don’t need music,” Beatrice replied with a smile. “We can pretend.”

Alexander took a deep breath before placing his other hand on her waist and pulling her closer. “Would you like to start with a waltz, or something else?”

Beatrice smiled up at him. “Whatever you think is best. You’re the expert here, not me.”

“Surely you’ve read about dancing,” he said.

“Reading and experiencing are two very different things,” she replied. “For example, I could read about magic all I want—and I have these past two days—but I’d never be able to perform it like Guinevere. It’s simply not my gift.”

Alexander frowned. “That seems like an odd example.”

“And yet, you understood it,” Beatrice said. “I’m sure you’ll be able to teach me to dance much more easily than Guinevere could teach me to use magic.”

“I think you’ll learn quickly,” Alexander said. “You seem to be good at thinking on your feet.”

His voice grew quieter as they stood there, poised to begin but unmoving.

“I would love to dance with you at our second wedding,” Beatrice said softly. “So hopefully, it will be easy enough for me to learn.”

“I think it will be,” he replied.

“You already said that,” Beatrice teased, her lips curling into her ever-present smile.

“Did I?” Alexander asked. For some reason, he felt breathless. Why couldn’t he move?

“I think this is where you spin me,” Beatrice said. “But I’m not the expert.”

Alexander nodded. “Yes, this is where the dancing begins. And this is the proper position, is it not?”

“It is,” Beatrice replied. “At least, I think so.”

He couldn’t explain why he was frozen. Something about holding her like this—standing so close to a beautiful woman who smiled up at him with such trust—rendered him unable to move.

Perhaps, for the first time in his life, he wanted something more than just a fleeting moment.

“You want to dance?” he asked, his voice low.

“Yes,” Beatrice replied, her eyes twinkling.

Her gaze seemed to acknowledge how ridiculous he was being, and he knew it too. Why couldn’t he just start?

Maybe he needed to kiss her first. Maybe that would fix everything.

“I… don’t know what to say,” he began.

“I think it’s as simple as telling me which way my foot is supposed to go,” Beatrice replied, a saucy smirk on her face.

Alexander shook his head. “Not the dancing part. The rest of it.”

She must have understood what he meant because her smile softened.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she said. “We can just dance. We’ll have the rest of our lives to say things.”

Alexander could barely breathe. Why did she have to be so wonderful?

He leaned down, and she pressed closer. The world seemed to stop as the distance between them vanished inch by inch—

Until the door to the dining room swung open, and Dietrich popped in.

Alexander turned and glared at the man, who, for perhaps the first time, looked genuinely repentant.

“I’m sorry,” Dietrich said. “I didn’t think you’d still be here.” He grimaced, glancing between Alexander and Beatrice. “Sorry. I’ll just… go.”

The man practically ran out of the sitting room, and Beatrice started giggling.

“He has the worst timing,” she said.

Alexander sighed. “He does, doesn’t he?”

She smiled up at him. “You should teach me how to dance.”

Acknowledging that the moment had passed, Alexander began to spin her around. Beatrice picked it up quickly, proving once again that there was little she couldn’t do.

After only a few short dances, Alexander felt confident that she would handle their wedding dance with ease.

“I don’t suppose you have any other friends who might show up at inopportune moments?” he asked as they paused, letting her go reluctantly.

“I think Dietrich is it,” Beatrice said, her eyes twinkling. “I’m sorry he has such a knack for interrupting moments.”

“At least he’s protective of you,” Alexander said. “I’m glad you have someone on your side.”

“But I already have someone on my side,” Beatrice replied. “I have you.”

Her words filled him with a warmth he hadn’t felt before. His heart seemed to understand what his mind hadn’t yet accepted: he loved Beatrice.

Now, he just had to find a way to show her how much.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Beatrice

BEATRICE WATCHED IN AMAZEMENT as Mrs. Jenkins bustled around the library. She had been excited to prepare a proper wedding for Lord Alexander, even if it wasn't under the happiest of circumstances, and she was doing an incredible job. Details were coming together overnight, and she was making this the wedding of Beatrice's dreams.

Now, none of Beatrice's dreams had included a sorcerer trying to marry her husband off to someone else, but that was a small detail. If she overlooked that, everything was practically perfect.

Beatrice took a deep breath and began to sort through the list of invitations once again. Dietrich had promised to deliver the invitations by hand if she had them ready within the hour. If she hadn't known better, she would have said he simply needed to get out and do something different. He was never very good at staying in one place for long.

She was hoping Sophia would still be in town, but Dietrich was unsure whether she and Caspian had gone back to Riyel before the storm hit.

She hoped they hadn't, and her friend could attend her wedding.

She took a deep breath and reached for the next list after checking off everyone on the invitation list. Mrs. Jenkins was remarkably thorough, and she'd had to change very little.

The big question…would her father be in attendance?

Would he even see the invitation?

Part of her hoped that Dietrich wouldn't give it to him, that he'd give in to the part of himself that hated her father and avoid him entirely.

But she had to send an invitation. It was his fault if he didn't come.

The thought was rather depressing, but she could no longer pretend that she didn't notice how little he cared. Alexander had learned more about her in the past week than her father knew after her entire life.

She'd always thought that marriage was not for her after seeing the way her mother had disappeared and her father had, too, in his own way. But

after being Alexander’s wife for a week, she could almost believe that their marriage would be different.

It was a terrifying thought, but she couldn’t pretend otherwise. She was falling for her husband, and it was only a matter of time before he realized it.

She had no idea how he would respond after everything he’d been through. Would he be willing to give in to love, or would he be more inclined to act as if it didn’t exist?

He seemed particularly determined to pretend that he had no hope. But Beatrice had seen it often enough over the past week to know that instead of his life turning him bitter, it had simply turned him into a man unwilling to let anyone get close to him.

But she’d seen the thorns around his heart beginning to disappear.

Not to mention the fact that he’d almost kissed her twice last night.

“What do you think? Anything else I’m missing?” Mrs. Jenkins asked, coming back in with a handful of tablecloths and napkins. “Tell me which of these you like best, my dear.”

Beatrice grinned. “I think they all look lovely, Mrs. Jenkins, and whichever of those options you pick, I would be thrilled.”

Mrs. Jenkins shook her head. “That’s not how this works, dearie,” she said indulgently. “This is your wedding. If you had to marry him in solitude the first time, the least I can do is make this the grandest event possible.”

It seemed hardly fair that she had to make all the decisions alone. “Speaking of my husband, shouldn’t he be here helping with this?”

“I believe he’s talking with the menfolk about setting up a perimeter,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “I think it’s probably best for you to just do the deciding.”

Beatrice sighed. Of course he was busy. What good was a husband if he didn’t help you make all the decisions you didn’t want to make yourself?

She would just have to choose and hope that he didn’t mind any of the results.

Though he didn’t seem likely to mind any decisions she made—if anything, he seemed more likely to want her to be happy no matter what.

The thought was so lovely she couldn’t quite stand it. After years of being ignored and belittled by the man who should have loved her most,

the fact that she had found someone who seemed willing to love her no matter what was thrilling.

Did he love her, though, or was it simply her imagination?

“You seem lost in thought, my lady,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “Can I help with anything?”

Beatrice turned to Mrs. Jenkins. “Do you think Alexander will ever love me?” she asked.

He’d come so close to saying something last night…and she’d thought maybe it would be that he loved her. But he hadn’t said anything else and had even seemed to be avoiding her this morning, despite last night.

Mrs. Jenkins’ eyes widened. “Now that’s a question I wasn’t expecting,” she said.

But her eyes softened as she sat down next to Beatrice. “I think that young man of yours has a very good head on his shoulders and he genuinely cares. Despite the fact that everything in his life seems to be going wrong most of the time, he has never once taken it out on anyone else and has always tried to do what’s best for everyone around him. I think he could be easily convinced to love you if he thought it was in your best interest for him to do so.”

Beatrice shook her head. “I don’t want to convince him to fall in love with me. I want him to just fall in love with me.”

Mrs. Jenkins shrugged. “I find that love is a fickle thing,” she said. “Sometimes it’s hard to know whether you love someone because you’ve fallen, or because you’ve chosen to.”

Beatrice pondered that for a moment. Would he choose to love her?

“And even when you’ve fallen in love, it doesn’t stay those happy butterflies forever. Love is work, dearie, and for those who are willing to put in the work, it is rewarding and wonderful.” Mrs. Jenkins smiled softly to herself. “I think if you were to convince Lord Alexander that allowing him to love you is worth the potential heartbreak, he would work for the rest of his life to love you as hard as he could. And you would have to do the same.”

“I am willing to do the same,” Beatrice said. “I just don’t know that I’m capable of it.” Tears filled her eyes at the words, even as she tried to hide them. From what she’d gathered over the years, her mother’s disappearance hadn’t been foul play. She’d simply given up on her husband and daughter and disappeared.

What if she did the same thing to Alexander?

Mrs. Jenkins reached over and patted her hand. “I understand, dearie,” she said. “I’ve gathered from your young friend that you didn't have the easiest start.”

Beatrice’s ears burned at the thought of Dietrich sharing her life story with Mrs. Jenkins. He never did know when to keep his mouth shut.

“But he told me that despite it all, you are one of the most amazing young women he has ever met, and that if you weren’t practically a sister, he would have already tried to sweep you off your feet. But given your friendship, he thought it best that you had married Lord Alexander.” Mrs. Jenkins laughed. “He is an odd one, that friend of yours, but he is a good man.”

“I think he is, too,” Beatrice agreed. “I suppose you’re right, though. I should allow myself to love my husband…even if I’m scared.”

“Love can be scary,” Mrs. Jenkins said, wrapping her arm around Beatrice’s shoulder and giving her a squeeze, “but I think you’ll find that it’s worth it, dear.”

She let go of Beatrice and stood. “Now, why don’t you run along for a bit. If you truly don’t care about the linens, I can make that decision for you. I think you should go look for Lord Alexander.”

“Thank you,” Beatrice said, nearly hugging the older woman in relief.

Beatrice hurried out of the library, eager to escape the other decisions, and almost ran into Alexander.

“Hello,” he said, reaching out to steady her as she stumbled.

“Hello,” she said shyly. “What are you doing?”

“I was looking for you,” he said. “I heard it’s almost dinner time, and I wanted to see if you would take a short walk with me before then. I know how much you like to walk outside, and most of the snow has melted.”

Beatrice smiled at her husband. “That would be wonderful,” she said, accepting the arm he offered.

“Do you need to change your shoes?” he asked.

Beatrice lifted her skirts to show him the warm boots Guinevere had helped her don that morning. “No need. I think she’s realized there’s always a good chance I’ll be heading outside and I shouldn’t be wearing slippers.”

Alexander as they arrived in the foyer. “I see she’s a smart one. You’re happy with her as a lady’s maid?”

“Very,” Beatrice said, nodding her head. “She suits me just fine.”

Jenkins was waiting by the door with her cloak in hand. Her husband reached for it before Jenkins could help her, and he wrapped the cloak around her shoulders and fastened it tightly, gently pulling the hood over her hair.

There was a tenderness in his gaze that hadn’t been there before.

Perhaps he was taking her on a walk so he could kiss her without being interrupted?

The thought made her heart beat faster.

Jenkins opened the door, and Alexander led her out toward the gardens. The remnants of slush piles were scattered around the yard, and the sound of snow melting and running down the edge of the roof was familiar and comforting. Beatrice took a deep breath, drawing frosty air deep into her lungs.

“I see nearly dying in a snowstorm hasn’t dampened your enthusiasm for the outdoors at all,” her husband said as they turned the corner into a more secluded part of the gardens.

Beatrice looked up at him, the corner of her mouth turning up. “Are you teasing me?”

“Am I?” he asked, looking genuinely surprised.

“I see nearly kissing me twice hasn’t changed your inability to smile,” Beatrice teased back. “Clearly I’m going to have to work on that some more.”

Alexander stopped walking, staring down at her. “Beatrice,” he began, before closing his mouth.

“Are you cursed to be unable to speak about matters of the heart?” Beatrice said gently, giving him a wink. “Because I’ve had some issues with that myself.”

“You find it hard to talk about too?” he asked.

“Of course,” Beatrice said, reaching for his hand. “This is new for me, just as it’s new for you. We have to figure it out together. I find it hard because of my parents, and I’m sure you do too, even if it’s for a completely different reason. But I believe that you and I have a chance at a long, happy marriage.”

“If we make it through tomorrow.”

The words were said quietly, but she heard them.

“We will make it through,” she said, reaching for his other hand. “I have to believe that.”

“Beatrice,” he began again, taking a step closer to her.

“Alexander,” she said softly.

“He has a betrothal agreement,” he said miserably. “He forced my father to sign it. I couldn’t tell you earlier because, well—”

“It’s invalid. You’re already married,” she said with a shrug. “The position of your wife has been filled.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this mess,” he said, his features crumpling. “I didn’t know—”

“I’m not,” Beatrice said firmly. “I’m not sorry at all. And we’ll figure it out together. Do you believe me?”

“I want to,” he admitted as she took a step closer and let go of his hands to grip the lapels of his coat.

“Then believe me,” she whispered.

Instead of answering, her husband cupped her cheeks with his hands, leaned down, and pressed his lips to hers.

Emotions swirled through her mind as she kissed him. Fear, uncertainty, but overpowering everything else, love.

She loved him.

She could no longer deny it, even if she wanted to.

She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer, pressing herself into him.

One of his arms wrapped around her waist, strong and sure, and his other hand swept through her hair as she pulled back for air, a few breaths required to fill her lungs once again.

So that’s what kissing was like.

No wonder people enjoyed it so much.

She opened her mouth to say something, but something hurtled into her shoulder, knocking her into him. A frantic chirping filled the air as Alexander wrapped his arm around her shoulders, holding her steady.

“What’s wrong?” Beatrice asked.

Rose began dashing back toward the house, then paused, waiting for them to follow her, looking back at them and chirping in alarm.

Alexander and Beatrice looked at each other.

This wasn’t normal.

Beatrice reached for Alexander's hand as they ran toward the house, where they were met in the foyer by a grim-faced Dietrich and Guinevere, who was openly panicking.

"They're nearly here," Dietrich announced, and Beatrice's heart sank into her stomach.

They weren't ready.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Alexander

BEATRICE LET GO OF his hand, and Alexander forgot propriety for a moment and wrapped his arm around her. Whether it was for her comfort or for his, he wasn't sure, but he didn't want to stand alone at the moment.

“They were heading into town,” Guinevere said.

“And you know this how?” Alexander asked.

“Rose told me,” Guinevere said. “Apparently she’s been sneaking out to fly around and look for them.”

Alexander frowned at Rose. “Are you trying to get yourself shot down?”

“Are they coming this way, or are they going to spend the evening at the inn?” Beatrice asked.

Guinevere looked at Rose, who started chirping. “They’re coming this way, and nearly here,” Guinevere interpreted.

“I thought we had until tomorrow,” Beatrice said, her voice shaky.

“I thought so, too,” he said, holding her tightly to his side, “but I suppose we weren't going to sleep tonight anyway.” His attempt at a joke to make her smile instead had her staring at him like he'd suddenly turned into a frog.

“Did you just make a joke?” she asked. “I knew I was going to rub off on you.”

Alexander smiled down at her, glad to see her smiling in return.

“I assure you,” he said, “you will continue to rub off on me for many years to come.”

“And you're being optimistic?” she asked, her eyes wide. “What happened to you, and where is the pessimistic lord I married?”

“He realized that he has important things in life still to do, and giving up is not an option,” Alexander answered.

And he's fallen in love with you, he thought. If Dietrich and Guinevere hadn't been standing there, he might have been brave enough to say it out

loud, but the words would be hard enough to say to her alone—with an audience, they were practically impossible.

“Go get dressed,” he said to her.

“In my wedding dress?” she asked, frowning.

“No,” he said, “but the most ladylike gown you have other than that one.”

“I'll see to it,” Guinevere said.

“Alexander,” his wife said, clinging to him.

He leaned down and kissed her forehead, closing his eyes and breathing in the floral scent of her hair. If this was to be the last time he would smell it, he wanted to remember it for the rest of his life. “Go get ready, Lady Dunham,” he said, releasing her. If he didn’t let her go now, he wasn’t going to be able to.

Guinevere took Beatrice’s hand and led her toward the stairs. He didn’t want to watch her leave, but he waited and watched anyway as she ascended the staircase.

She paused at the top and looked down at him, emotions warring on her face, before she followed Guinevere. Alexander took a deep breath as she disappeared.

They had to win, because he couldn’t let this be the last time he saw his wife.

He looked over at Dietrich, who was grinning at him.

“I see you,” Dietrich said.

“You see what?” Alexander said, glaring at the man. “You don't see anything.”

“You're right,” Dietrich said cheerfully, “I don't see you falling in love with her. Not at all.”

Alexander glared, and Dietrich grinned, completely unrepentant.

“Your secret is safe with me,” he said, “but I would suggest telling her before too long. I don't know how long she'll wait before she gets upset that you haven't told her.”

“I didn't know myself,” Alexander growled, glaring at Dietrich, who simply turned and walked away toward the study.

“Are you coming?” Dietrich called over his shoulder. “We'd better hurry.”

The plan was for Dietrich and Alexander to wait in the study, and Dietrich would get Beatrice when it was time.

How they would know when it was time, Alexander wasn't sure, but Dietrich seemed to think that everything would be okay. And for someone who was completely unused to optimism, he chose to believe Dietrich and follow his lead…because the alternative was trying to figure out how to be optimistic himself, and he was not prepared for that.

“I think,” Dietrich announced as they entered his study, “that you should be reading a book when he comes in.”

“I don't want to make him mad right away,” Alexander said. He still wasn't used to being able to speak about the sorcerer plainly. “I thought I could meet him in the foyer.”

Dietrich shook his head. “I don't think so,” he said. “That would be a man waiting to meet his future father-in-law. He is not your future father-in-law, nor is he a peer. You wouldn't go to the foyer to meet me if Beatrice didn't ask you to. You treat him the same way.”

Alexander could both see the sense in Dietrich's argument and be terrified of it at the same time.

“What if it doesn't work?” he asked, allowing himself to be vulnerable with Dietrich for a moment.

“Then the girls are safely upstairs, and Guinevere will get her out through the servants’ staircase,” Dietrich said simply. “And I will be here with you.”

“Why?” Alexander asked. “You could leave now, and he wouldn't know any different.”

“Because Beatrice loves you,” Dietrich said simply. “And if I left now and left the two of you to figure this out on your own, I would never forgive myself.”

“She loves me?” Alexander asked, oblivious to everything that he had said, except for that part. “How do you know?”

Dietrich sighed. “I should have known that would be your key takeaway. Yes, you fool. She loves you.”

“Why?” Alexander asked.

“I don't know, but I look forward to figuring it out. In the meantime, I look forward to saving the two of you.”

Alexander should have been able to focus more, but all he could think of as he sat in his chair with a book open before him, not seeing the words, was what Dietrich had said. Beatrice loved him, and he loved her, and he

would do anything to have a future with her, including facing down the man who had murdered his parents and cursed him.

Time ticked by so slowly that it felt like an eternity before he heard the foyer door open and Jenkins answering gravely, “He is in his study.”

Alexander glanced at Dietrich, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the pages of the book. Dietrich simply nodded, as if encouraging him to stay the course.

Alexander could barely breathe. Was Beatrice safely hidden away, or had she grown tired of waiting and decided to come downstairs? He wouldn't put it past her—hopefully, Guinevere had been able to keep her away.

All he wanted was for her to be safe.

“I don't like to be kept waiting,” the voice he had heard so many times in his nightmares said as his study doors were pushed open and the sorcerer walked in. “Why are you hiding here?” he sneered. “Too scared to come out and greet me like a man?”

“Simply busy,” Alexander responded, standing up and putting his book down. “Running an estate takes quite a lot of work.”

Across the room, Rose stretched lazily in her kitten form. Her posture screamed ignorance, but her attention was fixed on the sorcerer, and that gave him hope.

Perhaps Rose would be able to help them. She certainly had enough reason to want to.

“You didn't care to come and meet your bride?” the sorcerer asked with a scowl as a young woman entered the study. Alexander glanced at the young woman in surprise. Could she even be an adult? No wonder it had been so many years between the betrothal and the wedding.

She looked absolutely terrified.

“I’m sorry,” Alexander said, “but she cannot be my bride.”

He wished he still held the book and had something for his hands to squeeze as he stared down the man who had the power to destroy everything—and everyone—he loved.

“For you see, I’m already married.”

At his words, the young woman let out a choked sigh of relief before turning pale and glancing at her father, who was slowly turning a bright shade of red.

“You cannot be married,” Lohndrey said. “I’ve been checking every time I travel through. You think you can lie to me, but I see no wife.”

Alexander glanced at Dietrich and nodded, and Dietrich slipped out of the room, smiling at the young girl as he did so.

Now that he had seen her, Alexander no longer felt hatred toward his intended bride. If anything, he felt sorry for her, for she clearly didn't want this any more than he did. Perhaps that was something he could use to his advantage.

“You are to marry my daughter,” Lohndrey said, “and I will not hear any different. Besides, if you are married, why are there preparations for a wedding happening in your foyer? Surely you do not decorate that way in everyday life.”

“I am renewing my vows with my bride tomorrow,” Alexander said. “You asked for a wedding to be prepared. You didn't specify who the bride would be, and the position of my bride has already been filled.”

Movement in the doorway caught his eye, and Alexander smiled at Beatrice as she entered the room, Guinevere behind her, and made her way to his side. She looked beautiful, wearing a stunning golden gown that swished around her ankles as she walked, her hair up in a fanciful arrangement.

She looked every inch like Lady Beatrice Dunham.

His wife slipped her hand into his and looked up at him with a gentle smile.

The trust she was placing in his ability to protect her was astounding, and he didn’t deserve it. He wasn’t sure he could keep her safe, and the thought made him move to stand partially in front of her.

“Meet my wife, Lady Dunham,” he told the sorcerer, who was a shade of red that Alexander had never seen on a human before.

“I won't stand for this,” the sorcerer said, raising his hands and pulling a wand from his pocket. At the bottom was an egg that looked remarkably similar to the cracked shells Alexander had found near Rose when he'd found her in the garden.

Was that where he drew his power from?

The sorcerer began muttering, and Rose stood and sauntered over, jumping onto Alexander’s desk before transforming into her dragon form.

The sorcerer stopped talking, staring down at her with wide eyes.

“I'm going to assume you thought she was already dead when you abandoned her egg in my roses last spring,” Alexander said, as the dragon flew to perch on his shoulder. “But as you can see, she hatched. And it turns out that a dragon is quite loyal, and she does not take kindly to you threatening me or my wife.”

The sorcerer glanced nervously from Rose to Beatrice, then back to Alexander, but he raised his wand again and began to chant.

For once, Alexander didn't feel afraid. He could feel power surging through Rose, and as the sorcerer's wand began to glow, so did Rose.

When a spark of light shot from the sorcerer's wand, it met Rose's halfway, and the two sparks of light danced for a moment before the sorcerer simply disappeared with a flash of light.

Everyone in the room gasped.

“Is he gone?” the girl asked, after a moment of everyone staring at each other. “Am I free?”

“You’re free, Miss Lohndrey,” Alexander said as he glanced down at Beatrice, who immediately hurried to the girl and offered her arms for a hug. The girl collapsed into Beatrice's arms, bursting into tears, and Beatrice rubbed her back and murmured something in her ear.

“Where did he go?” Dietrich asked.

Rose began chirping, and everyone turned to Guinevere for a translation.

“She simply says, ‘He is far away,’” Guinevere said, confusion on her face. “I don't know what that means.”

There was more chirping. “She says that he will not bother us again,” Guinevere added.

“Are we going to get any more explanation than that?” Alexander asked, and the tiny dragon shook her head.

“She talks to you?” the girl asked.

“She talks to Guinevere,” Beatrice said. “Now let's get you taken care of, dear. I think we need some tea. What's your name?”

As his wife led the girl out of the room, Alexander collapsed into his chair.

It felt rather anticlimactic that after all those years of fear and worry, it was just…over. He was safe, and his wife was safe, and Eldenwilde was safe.

Perhaps Lohndrey would come back, but they had time to learn more about magic before then, and they would be better prepared.

Alexander took a sigh of relief for the first time in years.

It was over. They were free. He could discover what he and Beatrice were going to be. And he couldn't wait to find out.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Beatrice

BETWEEN GETTING MISS LOHNDREY settled in a guest room for the time being, eating dinner, and helping Guinevere research where Rose might have sent Milton Lohndrey, it had been several hours since they had watched the sorcerer disappear. And Beatrice still hadn't had a moment alone with her husband.

She waited for Guinevere to leave before picking up the three-piece candlestick, making her way to their adjoining door, and knocking gently on it.

The door opened before she could say anything, and she stared up at her husband, who was smiling down at her.

“Hello, wife,” he said.

“Hello, husband,” she replied.

He reached out and took her free hand, pulling her into his room and settling down on his bed.

She sat next to him, and he took the candlestick from her to set it down on the side table. Then, turning to her and taking both of her hands in his, he said, “I have something I want to tell you. I'm very nervous, but I want to get this right, and I think you should hear it from me.”

He took a deep breath before continuing. “I know that I went about this all wrong, and I should have told you from the beginning what was happening. I wish that I could have and that we could have started our marriage on a better footing, but I will never regret the fact that you are my wife and that you chose me, even if it may have seemed like you had no other choice.”

Beatrice opened her mouth, but he shook his head. “Let me finish, please. I know we don't know each other very well, but I would love to spend the rest of my life getting to know you more and spending the rest of my life with you, because I love you.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened. Had she heard him correctly? “You love me?” she squeaked, the words barely coming out.

“I love you,” he said again, reaching up to cup her cheek with his hand. “And I hope someday, you will love me, too.”

“But I already do,” Beatrice said, the words tumbling out so fast she wasn't sure he could understand them. “I love you, Alexander. I love the way you smile when you think I'm not looking, and the way you put up with Dietrich because I love him, and the way you care for Rose, and the way you care about your mother's books, and the way you love me. And I'll stop talking now,” she said, taking in the way he was leaning closer.

His thumb stroked her cheek, and she leaned into the palm of his hand, feeling, for the first time in her life, completely safe and loved. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, just taking in the moment and all its wonderfulness.

“I never imagined I would find someone like you,” Alexander said, and her eyes fluttered open as her husband kept talking. “But you have made me a better person. You helped me break my curse, and you stood firm even when there was danger. I’m so thankful that you did.”

He reached up and brushed an errant curl out of her face, tucking it behind her ear.

The movement brought him closer…or perhaps she was leaning closer…or maybe it was both of them. Either way, they were moving closer and closer to each other, as if drawn by magic, like two sparks of light that were meant to dance with each other forever and ever.

She reached for his shirt and pulled him closer as his hand tangled in her hair, and she tilted her face just right as he closed the distance between them.

It wasn’t unusual for Beatrice Dunham to think about what it would be like to be kissed, but it was unusual for her to have her whole world reduced to a single moment as her husband tenderly kissed her.

All time and space ceased to have meaning, and all that mattered was Alexander.

He pulled away, and she chased after him, resting her head against his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer until her whole side was pressed up against his, and she could feel his warmth and solid dependability. She knew without a doubt that her world would

never be the same. Because he was hers and she was his. And nothing, not even magic, could come between them.

Epilogue

Dietrich

DIETRICH STOOD IN THE doorway and watched as Beatrice and her husband joined their guests in the library for a wedding reception, despite having defeated a sorcerer only the day before.

It was not a large wedding party, but everyone important was there. Jenkins and Mrs. Jenkins were there. Beatrice had insisted that they come, not in their official positions, but as Alexander's family. Guinevere was there, too, the maid staying out of the way with Rose.

Dietrich had already said hello to Sophia and her husband, Caspian. They had been on the verge of heading back to the capital city when the snowstorm hit. Beatrice had been so excited that her friend was able to come to the wedding, along with the rest of the Rendon family.

Thea had closed the Cozy Cat Café to be there, and Dietrich wasn’t sure if she would ever do so willingly again. She looked almost pained as she walked around the room, paying attention to the food more than the people.

Dietrich preferred to stay on the fringe and watch rather than be a part of the chaos unfolding in the library. But Beatrice found him and hurried up to him—at least, as much as her huge dress allowed.

“What are you doing?” she scolded. “Your mother is over there talking to Lord Rendon on her own. The least you can do is be with her, so she is less nervous.”

Dietrich allowed Beatrice to pull him toward his mother, who gave him a reproachful look. He joined her and Lord Rendon.

“Ah, Dietrich,” Lord Rendon said. “Have you heard yet if Duke Vaughn is coming back anytime soon?”

“I believe they are planning to come in a few months, my lord,” Dietrich said, bowing to Lord Rendon. He liked the lord, if only because he had taken in Sophia and seemed genuinely to love his daughter-in-law, despite the fact that she had started as their goat girl.

“I hope we will see them soon,” Lord Rendon said. “It’s been too long since they’ve visited for more than a brief stay.”

“Not since their daughter went missing,” his mother said sadly.

Dietrich tried not to think about it. “I’m sure the Duke and Duchess will be pleased to hear you are asking after them,” he said to Lord Rendon.

A girl he didn’t recognize stood on the edge of the room with a tray of food in her hand. “If you’ll excuse me,” Dietrich said, bowing and excusing himself to the edge of the room to join her.

“You look as if you need someone to keep you busy,” Dietrich said with a grin as he helped himself to a piece of freshly toasted bread with something on top of it. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he was willing to give it a try.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” the girl confessed. “They hired me for the party, but I’ve never done this before.”

“Well, you’re doing a splendid job of standing there holding food,” Dietrich said with a grin. She offered him a slight smile, and Dietrich took that as a challenge.

“I haven’t seen you around town before,” he said.

“We’re new,” the girl said quietly. “I just moved here with my stepmother and stepsisters.”

“And where did you move to?” he asked.

“We live next to Widow Danise,” the girl said, nodding in his mother’s direction. “She’s the one who recommended me for this job.”

Dietrich’s eyes widened as he turned to look at his mother. So, she had new neighbors, and one of them was this beautiful girl.

Things were about to get very interesting.

“Thank you for the food,” he said, bowing slightly to her and hurrying away. He probably should have asked her name, but he had no doubt that he would find out what it was soon enough.

Before he could get to his mother, Beatrice caught up to him. “You know you’re next,” she said, poking him in the chest. “I love you too much to let

you waste your life without having someone to love."

Dietrich laughed. "You keep saying that, and yet I am still happily single."

But as he looked back at the young woman with the haunting blue eyes who was now living next door to his mother, he caught himself and shook his head.

He had no intention of falling for anyone, even if their eyes did seem to hold the secrets of all the world.

THANK YOU SO MUCH for reading Once Upon A Rose! If you loved it, I would be honored if you left a review on retailers, Goodreads, or BookBub – reviews help indie authors more than you can know!

To read a bonus epilogue showing Alexander and Beatrice and Rose, visit chickadeelanepress.com/rose-epilogue or scan the QR code!

Author Note

BEATRICE AND ALEXANDER'S STORY is one of my favorites to date and I hope you loved them as much as I do.

If you're wondering about how Beatrice's friend Sophia married a lord's son, you can find their story in Once Upon An Apple, and Dietrich's story will continue in Once Upon A Pumpkin!

You can learn more about upcoming books in the world of Galamere by joining my newsletter at chickadeelanepress.com/newsletter, or following me online—I'm @LandiWrites in most places! I'd love to meet you around the internet!

Wishing you fluffy blankets, warm drinks, and cozy books,

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About the Author

GABRIELLE LANDI LIVES IN Southern Indiana with her husband and children and has a soft spot for every stray cat that ends up on her front porch. When she's not writing, she spends her time chasing children, wishing there was more coffee, and eating chocolate like it's her job. If she had to write her own love story in tropes, it would include second chance romance and a secret relationship, and would be entirely unbelievable.

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